

The
CITY OF
SHADOWS

Peter Meredith

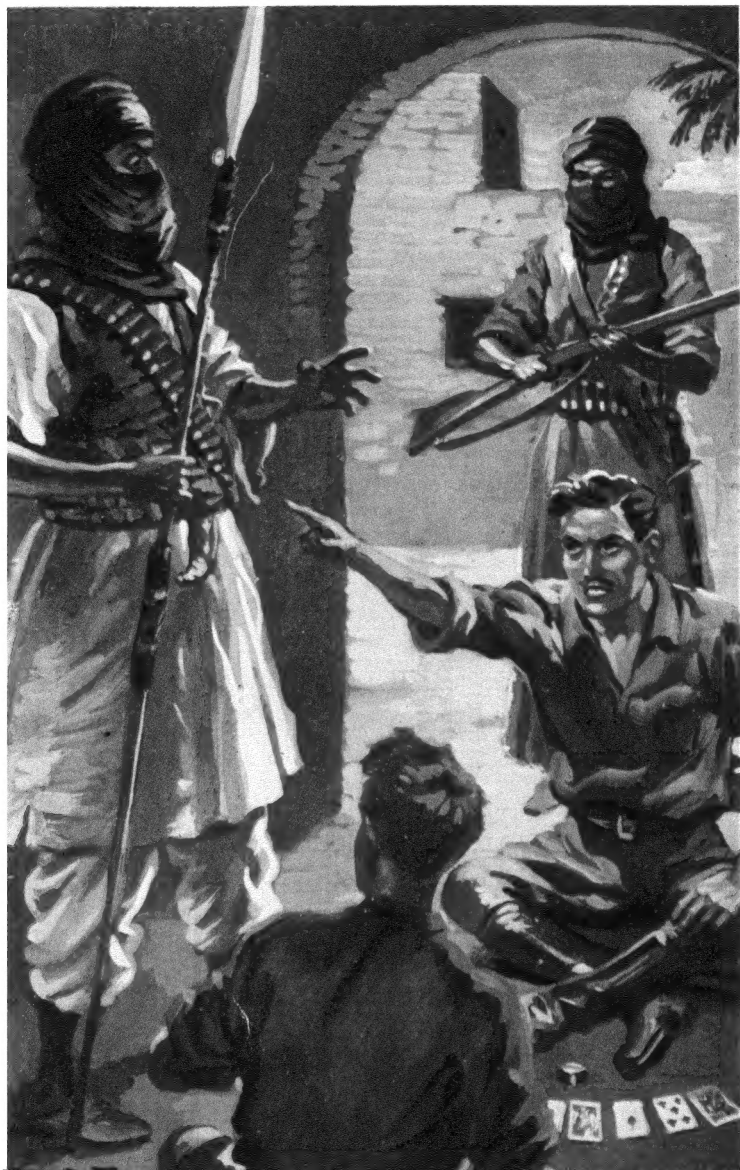
THE CITY OF SHADOWS

What this story is about

Bob Ellis and his young brother Vic are on a walking tour in peaceful Huntingdonshire when they hear that their elder brother Ron, after crash-landing in the North African desert, has been captured by Moors.

There is only one thing to be done, of course, and soon they themselves, together with their brother's friend Henri Deschamps, are roaming the desert in a desperate attempt to rescue their brother from the fate that awaits him as a slave in the dreaded salt-mines.

From then on this story is one of a constant battle of wits between the three white men and the Moorish raiders, of captures and audacious escapes, of the dangers of death from thirst and torture, until near the City of Shadows they meet with the strangest adventure of all.



HE SHOT OUT AN ACCUSING FINGER AT THE NEAREST BRIGAND

The City of Shadows]

[p. 53

Peter Meredith

THE CITY OF SHADOWS



FREDERICK WARNE & CO. LTD.
LONDON AND NEW YORK

FREDERICK WARNE & CO. LTD.
London

Printed in Great Britain

For
ANGELA
SUSAN
ROSEMARY
PETER
and
CAROLINE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I SOLD AS A SLAVE	9
II THE CARAVAN	28
III THE SOOTHSAYERS.	40
IV "WHILE THERE'S LIFE . . ."	60
V THE VULTURES WHISPER	74
VI THE BUYER OF SLAVES	97
VII SIROCCO	113
VIII THIRST	128
IX THE MOHURREN LAIR	141
X THE SLAVE-PIT	160
XI ESCAPE.	176
XII OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN	191
XIII IN SIGHT OF SMARA	204
XIV "WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOUR?"	229
XV "REUNION"	244

CHAPTER I

SOLD AS A SLAVE

BOB ELLIS eased the weight of the rucksack on his shoulders and glanced at his fourteen-year-old brother, who limped uncomplainingly beside him.

"That chap's in a hurry," he remarked, indicating the trail of dust rising behind a motor-car some two miles to their rear.

Vic Ellis dumped his haversack at his feet and seated himself wearily on the grassy bank bordering the road. He and his doctor brother were on a walking tour through Huntingdonshire, and from the summit of a gentle hill outside St. Neots the countryside spread out around them like a panorama.

"There's no particular reason why he shouldn't be," he retorted feelingly. "He's not on a walking tour, he's not likely to have rubbed up a blister as big as a two-bob bit, and I don't suppose his boots hurt. We are, I have, and mine do."

They watched the car halt abruptly beside the signpost at the cross-roads a mile back and then nose its way gingerly into the by-road, hardly more than a track, along which they were travel-

ling in the direction of Kimbolton. A few minutes later a powerful and extremely dusty saloon car drew level and then braked violently.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," said the young man at the wheel, leaning out of the window. "You are Robert and Victor Ellis, I hope?" His voice held the faintest trace of a foreign accent.

The two brothers looked surprised, but Bob stepped forward to the side of the car.

"I'm Robert Ellis," he replied. "This is my brother Victor. You appear to be looking for us rather urgently. Is there anything we can do? Anything wrong?"

With an audible sigh of relief the young man switched off his engine and got out. Bob Ellis received an impression of restless energy and lean wiry strength as the stranger extended his hand.

"I am Henri Deschamps," he said, and a worried crease between his eyes disappeared as he saw they recognised his name.

"Henri Deschamps!" exclaimed Victor. "Ronnie's pal! But isn't he with you?"

Bob noticed a momentary tightening of Deschamps' expression and knew instinctively that whatever news the Frenchman brought, it was not good.

"It was about your brother Ronald that I came to find you," he said quietly.

Vic Ellis felt that he had gone pale beneath his sunburn. Bob faced the Frenchman squarely.

"Has he been . . ." he began, and paused an instant before completing the sentence with a rush, "been killed in a crash?"

Deschamps shook his head.

"No, he's not dead," he assured them. "At least, he wasn't the last time I saw him. We crashed, yes. And the plane was smashed to splinters in the desert about four hundred miles sou'-sou'-west of Taroudant in Morocco. Luckily we both had time to bale out and we landed uninjured."

"Then what's happened to Ronnie?" Bob demanded.

"We had hardly reached the ground before we were surrounded and dragged off by the Blue Moors," replied Deschamps grimly. "The last time I saw Ronnie he was bound hand and foot to a camel on his way to be sold as a slave in the market at Smara."

"Sold as a slave!" They both stared at the speaker in horror. "Couldn't you do anything to help him?"

Deschamps lit a cigarette before replying.

"I hope you don't imagine I showed the white feather or let him down in any way," he said quietly, looking them both full in the face. "Your

brother was my greatest friend. Unfortunately, while he was being taken off to Smara I was somewhat handicapped. I was, in actual fact, buried up to my neck in the sand while a delightful gentleman named Bohari painted my eyelids with honey preparatory to letting loose a colony of pincer-ants who would eat my eyes out. Fortunately I speak Moroccan Arabic like a native and at the last moment I managed to put across a desperate bluff. It was too late to save Ronnie but I succeeded in getting away a few hours later. I felt that the best thing to do would be to come to England and find you both."

Something in the Frenchman's calm determined air lessened the shock of the news of their eldest brother's predicament. Both Bob and Victor knew instinctively that Deschamps' plans were already made for their brother's rescue, and they had complete confidence in his ability to carry them out.

"It was a pretty good effort on your part to find us in the middle of a walking tour," remarked Victor.

Deschamps laughed.

"Not really," he replied. "Ronnie had told me that Bob was in his last year as house-surgeon at Guy's and that you and he were inseparable during holidays. All I had to do was to go to

the registrar's office at the hospital and find out where he was. After that it needed a map and common sense rather than brains and patience. It'll be a good deal more difficult to find Ronnie, I'm afraid."

Bob dumped his rucksack and Vic's haversack on the back seat of Deschamps' car.

"How soon do we start?" he demanded.

Deschamps followed them in, reversed in a field gateway and headed the car back to London. For a time they drove in silence, each busy with his thoughts. Deschamps was thankful that the brothers had proved to be chips of the same block as Ronald. No fuss, no tendency to *discuter*, as he termed it to himself, no demand for an *histoire*. Just an assumption that they were automatically 'in' on the rescue-party, and that quiet, determined "How soon do we start?" That was what he had hoped for, and Henri Deschamps, millionaire and English public schoolboy, crack pilot of the French Resistance movement from 1940 to 1944, secret service agent in Morocco, big-game hunter and explorer, sighed happily. The most difficult part of his search for Ronald Ellis's brothers had gone off without a hitch.

Bob and Victor's thoughts were divided between their brother Ronald and the dark, determined man who drove the dusty car down the

Great North Road like a whirlwind. Ronald was twenty-six, two years older than Bob and twelve years senior to Victor. Adventure and danger had always been, to him, the very spice of life. A D.F.C. and bar in the Battle of Britain had been followed by a double D.S.O. for "Hazardous Duties of a Secret Character" with the Special Air Service. Fluent French and a groundwork of Arabic—the Ellises' father had been British Consul in Algiers—had caused Ronald to be chosen for certain "Hazardous Duties" in North Africa, during which he had met and co-operated with Henri Deschamps.

These two, who were both born out of time and were both intended by nature to be Elizabethan buccaneers and explorers, had formed an instant and indissoluble friendship on sight. After the war had finished, and finding peace incredibly dull, Ronald and Henri, like Bulldog Drummond, went to look for adventure. Henri, for reasons he could never really explain convincingly, believed that an inaccessible range of mountains in the almost unknown hinterland of the French Colony of Senegal were as full of emeralds as King Solomon's Mines were of diamonds. A millionaire, he suggested financing a two-man expedition to investigate: they would parachute supplies and equipment into a suitable clearing in the forests,

and bale out, leaving the plane to crash; afterwards, they would make their way overland to the coast . . . and Ronnie had jumped at the scheme. Now they had crashed in the least-known and most dangerous region of the Sahara desert and Ronnie, if he was still alive, had probably been sold as a slave. Bob's ambition to take the degree of Master of Surgery before he was twenty-five was obliterated. So also was Vic's secret determination to save Ronnie and Bob eighty pounds a year by winning a Founder's Scholarship at school. He was well aware of the fact that since the death of their parents, his brothers had stinted themselves in no uncertain way to pay his fees at Sedstone, the great public school at the foot of the Pennines, where they, their father, and grandfather, had all been educated. . . .

Half-way to London, Deschamps stopped the car at an hotel.

"Lunch, I think," he remarked, and a liberal tip to the head waiter secured them a small private room. It was not until lunch was over and coffee had been served that Deschamps told them the story of the crash and the capture of Ronald Ellis and himself.

"When I saw these tribesmen riding towards us in the distance," he went on, after having made

a pause to light his pipe, "I hoped they were Tuaregs. Many of the Tuaregs had helped us during the war. Ronnie and I had both carried out 'missions' to them from Marrakech or Agades and we were fairly well known among them. Those that didn't know us personally, at any rate knew of us by reputation and would have been friendly. They'd have taken word to Marrakech or Colun Bechar for us and got a plane sent out to pick us up. But when they came close enough for me to see that they were Blue Moors and not Tuaregs, I can assure you I had a very nasty shock. The Blue Moors are not at all nice people. In fact, they're probably the most cruel, most treacherous race of criminal devils on earth."

"Why do they call them Blue Moors?" Vic asked suddenly.

"They dress in dark blue, like the Tuaregs," Deschamps explained. "But, unlike the Tuaregs, they do not veil their faces. That is quite sufficient to distinguish them at a distance, for no Tuareg would ever discard his veil. They use a particular kind of cactus to make the dye for their cloth, and this dye comes off on the skin." He smiled suddenly. "It seems to be more successful as a skin dye than a stuff dye. By the time the children are ten years old they're an indelible navy blue from head to foot for the rest of their lives. Where

they came from originally, heaven alone knows. They're not Moors or Arabs. Personally, I think they're a survival of the aboriginal nomadic Berber, though I doubt if the Berbers would regard that as a compliment. They are far more fanatical than the most rabid Senussi. They are a law unto themselves, and anything that savours even remotely of Western civilisation is like a red rag to a bull to them. They won't even trade in the markets of places as far off the beaten track as Timbuktu or Ksar-es-Souk or Tidalt because, they say, they come in contact with the perfidious influence of the Unbelievers, as they call us Christians. On the very rare occasions when they have given battle to the *Goumiers* or a wandering column of the Foreign Legion, they've fought to the last man, taken no prisoners, murdered the wounded, and asked no quarter."

"Then isn't it a bit optimistic to hope that Ronnie's still alive?" asked Bob, after a painful pause. "I'd rather face facts and know the blunt truth than be buoyed up with false hopes and live in a fool's paradise."

Henri Deschamps regarded them both levelly for a few seconds.

"He's got rather more than a fifty-fifty chance of survival," he said at length. "He's young, he's tough, and he's roughed it before. He talks

Arabic and, most important of all, they think he's a Moslem belonging to some obscure Syrian sect. As a slave his price would be high and his value considerable. Whoever buys him will look after him well. His sufferings will be more mental than physical, because he must be convinced that I have been tortured to death. But still, I'll get on with the story. . . .

"As the Blue Moors surrounded us we could see that we were outnumbered by twenty-five or thirty to one. They were armed to the teeth and even if we'd had a couple of machine guns, resistance would have been useless. As it was, we hadn't even got a penknife between us. We were for it without the slightest doubt. As they charged towards us on their great cream-coloured camels and we recognised them for what they were, our first hope was that they'd kill us outright. You know: 'Them as dies'll be the lucky ones.' But after a bit of arguing among themselves—some of them were in favour of doing us in there and then—the 'Noes' had it. We were tied to camels and driven about ten miles to their village, a place called Fachi. We were flung down in the market-place at the entrance to the Sheikh's house, and left to roast with neither shade nor water until sundown."

Henri Deschamps nodded grimly as though

emphasising some point of recollection to himself, and then shifted his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other. Neither Bob nor Victor spoke.

"I shall not forget those hours, my friends," he continued. "On our way back from Smara with Ronnie we will visit that village . . . and Sheikh Bohari will wish he'd never been born.

"It is a biggish village and it was unexpectedly clean. That, at any rate, was something for which we were profoundly thankful. It lessened the maddening irritation of flies—that is something you will have to learn by experience. Soon after we got there our mouths were full of salt and acrid dust and our lips splitting with the heat. The sky was like brass and the air like a furnace. And did the gentle, kindly Sheikh Bohari give us water to drink? He did not, the swine!

"The village was long and low and sprawling. Low, flat-roofed houses blended so perfectly with the surrounding scrub-covered desert that even at a height of two hundred feet I'm pretty certain they'd be invisible from the air. Everything was built of hard-beaten earth. Most of the houses were one story high and with smooth, unbroken windowless walls. Narrow streets wound and wandered aimlessly from one tiny marketplace to another. Over everything was a strange,

sinister silence far more frightening than the noise of any wild howling Dervishes rushing into battle.

"As I said, we were flung off the camels and deposited like two sacks of dates, propped up against the wall of el Bohari's house. News of our capture spread like wildfire. In a matter of minutes almost every man, woman, and child in the place came to stare, hurl insults, and spit at us. It was worse than any nightmare. Even now it haunts me in the delirium of fever. I see crowds of blue-robed, cruel-looking, vicious-faced men milling round me, hurling insults and spitting in my face, and all the time their long ruthless fingers toy with the daggers in their belts. . . .

"An hour before sunset we were hauled through the Sheikh's gate to have judgment passed upon us. What with thirst and heat and hunger, and general reaction, I doubt whether either of us was even semi-conscious. This condition didn't suit the Blue Moors at all. There's no fun, from their point of view, in inflicting torture, mental or physical, on a man too far gone to appreciate what's happening. So the Q'adi—he's a Moslem magistrate—ordered the servants to sluice us down with buckets of water from the well and to give us some hot sweet tea. Half an hour later we were hauled back to the ~~so-called~~ Court.

Ronnie and I had not been allowed to speak to each other. . . . Once the water and the tea had restored our wits we began immediately to concoct some plan, but the Captain of the Guard, or whatever he was, told us he'd cut our tongues out if we didn't shut up. He meant it quite literally, too. So we did. Even during our trial we were not allowed to speak. Ron tried it once and got a jab with a dagger just below the shoulder-blade.

"The long and the short of it was—leaving out the insults—that we were Unbelieving dogs; that by our practice of eating pork and drinking wine our very presence defiled any True Believers with whom we came in contact; that aircraft were the conception of the Devil, being run, as they are, by alcohol! Allah himself had cursed our journey through the skies, otherwise the plane wouldn't have caught fire and crashed. What Allah had begun, they would finish. Allah had evidently intended us to die horribly by burning in mid-air and by the wiles and ability of Satan we had defeated the intentions of the All-Merciful Allah . . . and so forth. Then they started squabbling and arguing among themselves as to the stickiest and most painful death they could devise for us. Some of those elderly gentlemen had revolting imaginations. It was the Sheikh himself who

stopped any further discussion and laid down what was to be what."

Henri Deschamps broke off and glanced from Bob to Victor. His lean, sun-tanned face seemed unexpectedly white and stern.

"You've heard of the infamous water-torture?" he asked abruptly, and they nodded.

"Well," he went on, "the general idea was that Ronnie should die the same way—only with scalding water."

Victor gave a sudden, half-strangled exclamation, and Bob looked up.

"You know, Deschamps, I'd like to meet Sheikh Bohari," he said quietly. "You might not think it, but I'm quite a good shot with a pistol."

"I hope you'll get an opportunity to prove it," Deschamps retorted with a grim smile. "I've already told you what my fate was to be. Buried in sand up to the neck, smeared with honey, and left for pincer-ants and hyenas to deal with. . . . The fun was to start at sunrise.

"They carted us off and threw us into adjacent huts with a sentry outside the doors. I racked my brains for a plan of escape, but, as usual, Ronnie was a jump ahead. You remember his gift of mimicry?"

Bob and Victor nodded. They did, indeed!

"It came in remarkably useful," Deschamps went on. "By and by, Ronnie began to sing *Sunhas* and verses from the Koran. He didn't know a single note of Arab music but he put up a very good imitation. . . . I began to recite the prayers for the dying in as loud a voice as I could. Luckily, I've spent so long among Arabs that I know great slabs of the Koranic prayers by heart. But Ronnie, with his tenor voice, left me standing. By and by there was a bit of a commotion outside and I heard old Bohari's voice. I found a sort of peep-hole in the wall and managed to see part of what was going on.

"The sentry opened Ronnie's door and Bohari stood on the threshold. I couldn't hear what Bohari said, but Ronnie let fly at him with every Islamic curse he could lay his tongue to. He cursed the Sheikh personally, his wives, his children, and right down to his children's children's great-grandchildren. He cursed his cattle and his camels, his lands, his house, and every single thing he possessed. He finished up by telling the old blackguard that that would teach him a lesson not to put unoffending brother Moslems to death just because they were better educated and understood matters which he did not. And so forth. This, of course, upset the whole apple-cart.

“‘Moslems!’ exclaimed the Sheikh. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were a follower of the Prophet?’

“‘How could I, you addle-brained old son of a camel?’ Ronnie retorted. ‘You, who ordered our tongues to be cut out if we even spoke!’

“The old man was pretty startled, as by Moslem law he was absolutely in the wrong. He’d had no reason to suppose we were Moslems, but even so he ought to have found out one way or the other. So that if Ronnie had really been a Moslem the old Sheikh would have believed the curses to be effective. He believed it anyway, if it comes to that.

“After a certain amount of palaver the death sentences were quashed and we were turned loose, given dates and sour milk and told to make ourselves as comfortable as we could in one of the empty huts. In actual fact we were nothing more than prisoners at exercise.

“Ronnie and I were both pretty certain that there was some double-crossing going on behind our backs. We both had that nasty cold feeling between the shoulder-blades—you know, knives and things. . . .

“Next day a trap was laid for us and in we

walked with both feet. Ronnie and I went for a gentle reconnaissance soon after sunrise, before the heat made walking unbearable. Lo and behold! in a quiet bay in the village walls were two first-class mehari camels, unattended and apparently belonging to nobody.

“ ‘Just what the doctor ordered!’ said Ronnie, and I agreed.

“ We went for water just after midday and made it our business to go casually past that bay. The camels were still there. And they were still there at sundown. Of course, it's no use saying now that Ronnie and I should have smelt a rat. Of course, we should have done. I'm more to blame than Ronnie; I've spent a long time in the desert and I should have realised that no Arab would ever leave valuable brutes like that in the glaring heat all day long. Even in camp he'd have rigged up some sort of shelter for them. But there it was. We were so excited it just didn't occur to us, and we fell for it.

“ These Blue Moors are like the Guraran nomads in some ways—they feed in whole communities. We, as comparative prisoners, fed on our own. As soon as an opportunity presented itself we sneaked out and made for the camels. That's just what we were meant to do. We hadn't

gone half a mile before we rode straight into an ambush.

"Stealing a horse or a camel is punishable by death. . . . The pit and the honey were already prepared for me. Ronnie, being twice as big and as strong as I am, would bring a big price in the Smara slave market . . . and the camels were waiting to take him there. They'd got everything planned to a 't.' That was the last Ronnie and I saw of each other."

Deschamps stopped speaking and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"How did you finally get away?" asked Victor.

"They left one man behind to collect the pincer-ants when they'd done with my eyes," replied the Frenchman grimly. "By reciting certain prayers I bluffed him into believing I was a *Marabout*—a Holy Man. I promised him that we would enter into the joys of Paradise if he dug me out. He did—because I got my hands round his throat and strangled him then and there. I took his camel and rode due north until I reached the Moroccan frontier. The rest you know."

He paid the bill and they followed him out to the car.

"Vic and I have both got passports," Bob remarked as the car gathered speed. "If we

can leave by 'plane to-night we ought to reach Marrakech to-morrow."

Deschamps' only reply was to make the speedometer needle advance from forty to seventy-five.

CHAPTER II

THE CARAVAN

It was night. Light from the embers of a great fire of thorn bush and ironwood, fanned by a fitful breeze, cast eerie shadows across the camp. Henri Deschamps sat up, twisted the heavy pistol at his belt to a more comfortable position, and then flung another branch of thorn into the glowing fire. In a moment or two a gust of wind caused a tongue of flame to lick the lowest twigs and with a sudden hiss the whole bush went up in a fierce crackling blaze. The noise awoke Bob Ellis, who drew his blanket tighter round his shoulders and moved a foot or so nearer Deschamps. The desert was bitterly cold beneath the great indigo blanket of the sky in which the stars stood out like chips of illuminated ice.

"The trouble with the Sahara," came Vic's voice from the depths of his flea-bag, "is that you need more clothes than you can carry. It's as hot as an oven by day and as cold as a 'frig by night. This wind feels as though it was coming straight from the North Pole."

"Stop grumbling and make some coffee,"

retorted his brother. "What's the time, Henri?"

"Four o'clock," replied the Frenchman, looking at his wrist-watch by the light of the fire. "We should be on the move again by half-past five at the latest. Put the water on for coffee, Vic, and then we'll have a conference. We're on the edge of enemy territory. By to-night we'll be well within it."

Vic went to the goat-skin water-bags and carefully measured out three cups full of water. They had the bare margin necessary to allow for a two-day delay in reaching the next water-hole. In that desolate region water was of more value than gold and the equivalent of life itself; a deficiency of even a pint could easily result in death. As he laid the goat-skin down again he glanced round the camp. The moon, half-way through the last quarter, gave just enough light for him to discern the shape of the camels, a few feet to his right. They lay with necks outstretched, resting on the sand, a sure sign they were both tired and thirsty. Vic thought they resembled a series of dark, huddled boulders in a vast sea. Then he glanced to his left where Atua, their Sous guide, and the camelmén were sleeping round the baggage. For some instinctive reason for which he found it difficult to account, Vic Ellis distrusted Atua. He

went back to their camp-fire and put the water on to boil for coffee.

Henri D^eschamps spread a map on the ground as Vic sat down. With the stem of his pipe he indicated a point in the south-west corner.

"Smara is down there," he explained. "We are just here." The pipe-stem moved to a point a hundred and fifty miles to the north-east. "We are now on the edge of what is known as the Sequiet el Hamra—the Red Desert. It's fierce, it's wicked, and it's dangerous. Smara is right in the middle of it. The French claim it as part of the Sahara and the Spaniards consider it part of the Rio del Oro. Heaven alone knows which of them it actually belongs to. In any case, both of them give the place as wide a berth as possible. It's a 'forbidden territory'—stretching from just north of the River Draa very nearly down to the Senegal. So far as I know, it's the only part of Africa of any size which no white man has ever crossed and lived to tell the tale."

He broke off while Vic went back to the fire to fetch the boiling coffee.

"By the time we make camp to-night," he went on, when Vic returned, "we shall have reached the Draa. From there we shall have to go on alone. Atua and the camelmen refuse to go any farther into Blue Moor country. We'll have to do

about two hundred miles on our own, depending on my map and compass." Deschamps frowned for a moment. "What I'd give a thousand francs to know," he added with a worried note in his voice, "is how much geography the Elders of Smara know."

"Geography?" said Bob, speaking for the first time. "I don't quite follow. What's geography got to do with it?"

"A great deal," replied Deschamps seriously. "The success or failure of our plan—our lives and Ronnie's—may depend on it. These desert tribesmen know their own immediate region of the desert, they know the cities like Timbuktu, Marrakech, and Timimoun where they go and trade, and they know Mecca. As for the rest of the world, they hardly believe it exists. England, China, Brazil, or the U.S.A. mean absolutely nothing whatever to them. It is over that that we may come to grief."

"Why?" asked Bob and Victor together. "I still don't quite follow," added Bob.

Deschamps slowly sipped his boiling coffee.

"I had hoped to be able to raise a caravan of such proportions that we could ride straight into Smara and overawe them by our sheer magnificence. That would have been the ideal way, as these people love ostentation. But the men

won't come. They're too scared. The only alternative is to go on alone, and trust to bluff. We'll have to pose as three Holy Men—*Marabouts*—who see visions and make prophecies. My Arabic is nearly perfect and I can easily pass as a young Riff from the north. You two are more difficult, but I think we can pull it off. You know some Arabic, but not enough to palm yourselves off as Moors. On the other hand, Egyptian is entirely different from the lingo here. The chances of anybody in Smara speaking Egyptian are about one in a million. The clothes are the problem, of course," and he looked doubtfully at the shirts and shorts they were wearing. "Anyway, we'll have to chance it. Vic could—in fact, he must—pass as a young, very holy, and very travel-stained Egyptian. Bob must be a young Afghan fakir."

"Strewth!" muttered the Ellis brothers.

"I know it sounds insane," Deschamps went on grimly, "but it's our best chance of success. All three of us—one in the Riff Mountains, Vic in Cairo, and Bob in Kabul—have had a vision of the Prophet, who told us to meet and come to Smara to seek out a young white slave, a Follower of the Prophet, obtain his release and take him and the Sheikh of Smara to Mecca, where the Prophet will reveal himself in another dream. We will whisper and hint that we believe this

young slave to be the Instrument selected by the Prophet to unite North African Islam and sweep the Christians into the sea."

Bob yawned and then took another mouthful of coffee.

"You did say something about it sounding insane, didn't you?" he asked sarcastically. "What have you been reading lately, *Green-mantle* or *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*?"

"Shut up, Bob," said Vic. "I'm on. What a rag if we pull it off!"

"I'm not joking, Bob," said Deschamps with a hint of asperity in his tone. "You can take it from me that if we are to rescue your brother we've got to play a very bold game and bluff for all we're worth. There's no 'if' about succeeding either, Vic. We've jolly well got to succeed. If we don't, we'll never get out of Smara alive, and that state of affairs wouldn't help Ronnie very much."

"Right," retorted Bob. "If you're serious, there's no more to be said. If it's the best plan, I'm with you right up to the neck. Sorry if you thought I was jeering or going to mutiny in the face of the enemy. You're the boss here, and so far as I'm concerned, what you say goes."

Deschamps grinned.

"Forget it. We'll go into details to-night. I don't suppose that any of the men can understand

a word we say, but in this matter it's better to be safe than sorry, and I'd rather wait until we're entirely on our own. We'd better start getting ready to move."

The first faint gleam of dawn began to tint the eastern sky. The camels raised their necks from the sand and emitted grunts of sleepy protest as the camelmen unwrapped themselves from their cloaks and started to move about.

Bob threw another bundle of thorn on the fire.

"Listen!" exclaimed Vic suddenly. "What's that?"

"What?" asked Deschamps.

"I thought I heard a shot."

Deschamps looked worried.

"I hope not. I heard nothing with the camels kicking up that din." He raised his voice and called in Arabic: "El Atua, was that a shot?"

For an instant the bustle behind them ceased, then a low babble of voices broke out.

"No, no, *ya Sidi*," the guide called back. "We none of us heard anything."

"Nor did I," said Bob. "The crackling of those thorns would stop anyone hearing anything."

"Let's get moving," said Deschamps. "Hey, *ya Hameda*! Roll our blankets and bring our camels."

Hameda, a young, astonishingly handsome Chleuch tribesman from the mountains southwest of Marrakech, came forward, silent and ghostlike in his white robes. Two months previously, when they set out from Marrakech, he had appointed himself personal servant to the three white men, who had all taken an instinctive liking to him.

They watched him fold their blankets, collect their drinking mugs and camp kit and pack it deftly in the saddle-bags that hung each side of their great mehari camels. He had done much, in a quiet, efficient way, to make their long and painful journey comfortable.

"We shall miss you to-morrow, Hameda," said Bob.

Hameda glanced at them, one by one, with grave, inscrutable eyes, and then jerked his chin upwards in the silent emphatic negative of the desert nomad.

"No, *ya Sidi*," he said quietly, "I shall not turn back. I shall come with you to Smara."

Deschamps spun round as though he had been stung.

"How knowest thou we go to Smara?" he demanded. Their ultimate destination had been kept a very closely guarded secret from the men,

who had been put off with a story of map-making along the banks of the Draa.

A smile flickered for a moment at the corners of Hamedá's mouth.

"Perhaps it was revealed to me in a dream. I forget," he answered. "For long I have intended to visit these people, to see their slaves and to——" He checked himself. "*Ma'leichi!* It doesn't matter. Maybe it shall come to pass that I shall get there first," he finished up.

"If you know whither we travel," said Deschamps, "then must also these others." He indicated the guide and the camelmen. "Whose babbling tongue told you?"

"Master, I have told no one what I know," replied Hamedá. "I am young and have work to do before I die. I swore an oath as a child. . . . To talk would be but to hasten my own death."

Bob and Vic understood enough Arabic to follow what he had said. They looked puzzled. So did Deschamps.

"I wonder what all that's supposed to mean," the Frenchman said to the others. "Why should you die sooner if it were known that you were going to Smara?" he added in Arabic.

The Chleuch shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps I am wrong and speak foolishly," he

replied. "If that is the Will of Allah, time will show." He glanced with a frown of distaste towards the other camelmen. "I shall be glad when we ride on alone."

He strode abruptly away.

"Now I wonder what we're supposed to make out of all that," remarked Bob.

"I don't know," said Deschamps. "But those camelmen seem to be kicking up a most unnecessary amount of noise this morning. Anyone would think they were doing it on purpose."

The camels, always noisy and protesting when the time came for loading up, were roaring angrily, snapping and biting at their agile drivers as though in retaliation.

"There's something wrong," exclaimed Bob, and picked up a heavy rawhide whip. "Come along! I'm going to investigate."

They soon found out. The drivers were surreptitiously prodding the animals with short, steel-pointed goads, keeping their knees hobbled to prevent them from rising.

Deschamps strode over to where Atua stood with a triumphant evil grin across his coarse, brutal face.

"What's the idea?" he demanded furiously.

Atua laughed contemptuously, but before he had time to reply, the silence of the dawn was

shattered by a volley of rifle-shots from the crest of some low dunes that lay fifty yards to the east. A moment later the camelmén had formed a threatening ring round the three men. Deschamps' hand flew to his belt, but before he could grip the butt of his pistol his arms were pinioned by Hamedá.

"Don't, master, don't," whispered the Chleuch youth. "Later—later, when you'll need it."

Bob and Victor, caught entirely by surprise, were unarmed and powerless.

Atua spat at them one by one and then turned his back on them as his followers made way for a party of the dreaded Blue Moors.

"Good work well done, O Atua," remarked their leader. "A cross wind and shifting sand delayed us several hours, but the signal—the roaring of thy camels—set us back on the right path."

He ran an appraising eye over Bob, Victor, and Deschamps.

"They'll fetch a good price," he commented, and began to count out money into Atua's outstretched avaricious palm.

Deschamps gave a sigh of relief.

"Thank heaven he doesn't recognise me," he said quietly, and meant it. "The last time we met I hadn't a six weeks' beard and I wasn't as black as a nigger from two months of sand and

sun in the desert. That gentleman is my distinguished friend Bohari, Sheikh of Fachi, who is responsible for whatever has happened to Ronnie."

"I'd give a thousand pounds to plug just one bullet into him," muttered Bob savagely.

"*Ma'leichi, ma'leichi*—later, later," Hameda whispered again. Swiftly he unbuckled Deschamps' belt and fastened it round his own waist beneath his *burnous*. Then, releasing his master, he vanished into the gloom, apparently to join Atua and his followers.

CHAPTER III

THE SOOTHSAYERS

TOWARDS noon the sun became too terrific even for the party of brigands to continue their break-neck journey. They halted in the meagre shade of some stunted thorn bushes and Bob, Victor, and Deschamps were flung unceremoniously from the camels to which they had been tied. The ropes which bound their arms and ankles were taken off and they were allowed to walk about at will. They were given water, a flat cake of barley bread, and a few handfuls of dates.

When his circulation had returned, Vic sat up and looked round.

"What about making a dash for it?" he whispered to the others.

Bob looked doubtful and Deschamps shook his head.

"Useless. They know that, or they'd have kept us tied up. At the best we'd get ten yards before they shot us in the back. At the worst they'd let us go for miles, ride us down and leave us to die of heat-stroke and thirst. For the time being we're better off as we are."

Meanwhile their captors slept in such shade as they could find, one man mounting guard over the entire party. Towards sunset they remounted and rode on. Dawn had just broken as the village of Fachi came in sight, and in the half-light of early morning its grim fastness struck chill even to the heart of Henri Deschamps.

It was more of a stronghold than the Frenchman's description had led Bob and Victor to expect. It was impregnable of assault and impossible of escape—that was clear almost at a glance. As they rode in through a great, dark double gateway they could see through the low, narrow windows that pierced the immense thickness of the walls that the city was defended by a double line of ramparts, with a deep moat-like trench, thirty feet wide, between. At the inner gate—the 'needle's Eye' of all Oriental and Moslem cities—the brigand caravan had to pause and form single file, and glancing upwards the three prisoners saw that the inner wall was high, smooth, and unscalable.

Deschamps could read what was passing in the other's minds.

"It's less forbidding on the far side of the town," he whispered. "The country on that side is so boulder-strewn right to the walls that no enemy

could ever rush it. A few riflemen could hold that without help for months at a time."

The narrow streets, rarely more than mere lanes and slits between the houses, were dark and stifling. The place smelt of mystery and ruthless cruelty. Even Bob felt a pang of hopelessness and depression.

They reached the central market-place where a great crowd assembled and pressed round the prisoners. Deschamps had told them that the inhabitants of Fachi were a singularly unpleasant crew, but neither Bob nor Victor had imagined such depraved ferocity as was depicted on the vicious faces surrounding them. They were shoved and goaded through the sweaty, evil-smelling mob until they came to a small cubical building that backed on to a massive wall. The heavy, copper-studded door was dragged open and they were flung inside. The door was pulled to and they heard a bolt ram home with an air of relentless finality.

"So here we are," remarked Bob bitterly.

"We know that," retorted his brother. "But what *I* want to know is how we are going to get out again?"

"So do I," replied Bob grimly. "What's the drill, Henri?"

Deschamps tugged at his beard.

"If that scoundrel Sheikh Bohari hasn't recognised me, we've got a chance on the principle that while there's life there's hope. On the other hand, if he has, my number's up anyway."

"Three little Christian men
Among the Moors so Blue,
One met a Sheikh he knew,
Then there were two."

"During the war," remarked Vic quietly, "defeatism was regarded as the worst of the Seven Deadly Sins. Snap out of it!"

Henri Deschamps laughed shortly.

"You know, Bob, Vic's scored off both of us. He's absolutely right. The first and most important thing is for us to keep cheerful. Once we let this disaster get on top of us, we're sunk. The next thing to do is to get out of here, as the sardine said when they popped him in the tin before he was dead. Let's get cracking."

By now their eyes were accustomed to the gloom of their prison.

"There seems to be light coming in from the roof in that corner," said Vic. "I'm the lightest and Henri's the tallest. If I get up on his shoulders I might be able to see something."

"No go," said his brother. "Henri'll have to get on mine. He's been here before, remember."

If there's anything to see he can get his bearings quicker than either of us."

"Right!" agreed Deschamps. "Here goes! Give me a leg up, Vic."

Vic knitted his fingers to make a stirrup and in a moment Deschamps stood balanced on Bob's broad shoulders.

"It's a ventilation hole of sorts," he called down to the others. "The wall's about two feet thick. There's nothing to see except another—— Yes, there is, though! From this angle I can just see the Seven Virgins of Fachi. Vic, give me that wrist-watch compass of yours and I'll get the bearing." He seized the tiny instrument that Vic quickly unstrapped and passed up to him. "Thank goodness it's luminous," he went on. "The Seven Virgins are nor'west by west from here. Blest if I can see what good that bit of information's going to do us." He balanced himself delicately—"Hold tight, Vic"—and landed lightly on his toes.

He set the compass on the floor.

"Right," he went on. "That's due north. Now then, you two! One of you go over there to that corner, and the other go over to that one. Bearing in mind that that wall is due north, work out in your mind, without speaking, the direction of the big double gates we came through this

morning. Start from this door and work backwards. Then come and whisper to me. If all three of us—or even two—get the same result, it's probably the right one."

For some moments there was silence.

"Good!" exclaimed Deschamps at length. "Vic makes it due south, Bob makes it 'as near south as makes no odds,' and I reckon it south-east by south. Right! Well, we've got north, we've got the Seven Virgins, we've got the big gate and we've got this prison. That's the beginnings of a map, anyway. Direction's correct, scale's remarkably wonky so far. Now Bohari's house was—what?—about three hundred yards ENE. of the Seven Virgins. That bit of scale's approximately correct, anyway. I wonder what else we can find? Oh, for a sand table, or even a sheet of paper and a pencil."

"There's something here that looks like an old nail out of a horse-shoe," said Vic. "Could you scratch a map on the wall with that?"

"Can a duck swim?" retorted the Frenchman. "I can have a darn' good shot at it, anyway."

"Just a mo'," Bob interrupted. "Who or what are the Seven Virgins of Fachi?"

Deschamps laughed.

"They're seven enormous palm trees that grow in the centre of the market-place on the north side

of the village." He scratched a rough plan of the place on the mud wall. "I'm beginning to get my bearings. The north side, where Ronnie and I were, is the wealthy part of the town where all the nobs hang out. The south is the poor, overcrowded part—that's more or less where we are now."

"H'm," Vic said thoughtfully. "We're the Sheikh's prisoners presumably. So were you and Ronnie. I wonder why he's dumped us here instead of taking us up to where you were before?"

"Easy enough to work that out if you think about it," put in his brother. "Once bit twice shy. Henri got away. Down here the crowds are thicker; more people about. He argues that *if* we get out someone'll spot us before we get far."

"Now then," said Deschamps, "let's cut the cackle and get down to the hosses. How are we going to get out? If that double-faced little Hamedah hadn't taken my gun it would be easy."

"I know," said Bob. "'Until you need it' or 'You'll need it later,' or some such thing, he said, wasn't it?"

Deschamps nodded.

"Yes. And all that mysterious stuff about

going to Smara with us . . . double-crossing little swab! I wonder how much the Sheikh paid that rotter Atua for us?"

"It wasn't much, anyway," Vic told him. "I was the nearest when he paid up, and he didn't hand over a lot. Five hundred francs at the most."

"My godfathers!" Deschamps exclaimed bitterly. "And I had twenty thousand tucked away in the lining of my belt. We could have bribed the whole town with a thousand francs. These people would sell their own mothers for the value of the gold in her eye-teeth."

"Do they value gold very highly?" demanded Vic.

"Very. But as we omitted to bring any bullion we'd better think of something else," retorted Deschamps ironically.

"Bob has a pretty solid signet-ring, and I have father's fob seal. A well-to-do chap wouldn't take much notice of 'em, but to somebody poor—really poor . . ."

"Brain-wave!" exclaimed Bob. "Good for you, Vic, I'd never have thought of that in a year. Any hope, Henri?"

"It's an idea certainly," replied Deschamps. "It gives us a starting-point for a plan. There's certain to be a jailer sitting outside that door

somewhere. If he's poor enough, or greedy enough, anything might happen."

"Quite," retorted Vic. "From your description of them, I'm beginning to see that. When we've worked out what we want him to do, if he's avaricious enough, as you put it, he'll collar the things and then laugh in our faces. It'll have to be something he can't double-cross us over."

"Yes," said Deschamps, "I agree. Are that ring and the seal engraved? I can't see in this light."

"They are," replied Bob. "They've got our crest—an eagle's head and a coronet."

"Couldn't be better," said Deschamps. "For Pete's sake, put 'em somewhere safe before somebody takes a fancy to 'em. Hang 'em round your neck on a bootlace or something. Then if anybody tries to steal them, we can spin a yarn that they're talismen and that the engravings are magic—blessings and safety to the wearer and curses and damnation to the stealer. All fanatics are extra-superstitious and these Blue Moors wouldn't dare touch them with a pair of red-hot tongs."

"I see," said Vic. "So if we can pitch a tale strong enough, some poor sap would do anything to get one of them as a reward. Okay! What we want is a superstitious jailer, not some

avaricious bloke who's just been let out of the workhouse."

Bob gave an exclamation of impatience.

"Oh, fiddlesticks! Talking won't get us out of here. Can't we tunnel through the wall or something? Let's have some action. This waiting in the dark gets on my nerves."

"Pull yourself together, Bob," snapped Deschamps sharply. "More escapes have been mucked up, and more people killed or re-captured, by lack of preliminary planning, than by anything else. 'Talking,' as you term it, has produced two very useful things so far—a map, and the beginning of a plan. None of us will get far unless we get both worked out to the last detail. That's the first elementary rule you're taught when you're training to parachute into enemy territory."

"I'm sorry, Henri. Go ahead."

"So far so good," said Vic. "Find a superstitious fanatic and pitch him a yarn about the crests. I seem to remember something about 'First catch your fish, then cook it.' Our trouble is that we haven't a hook and line to catch the blinking fish with."

Deschamps gave a low chuckle.

"We have. It's in my pocket as a matter of fact, only I hadn't given it a thought till just now. My patience cards! You remember when we

were outfitting in Marrakech I told you to try and get some? Patience has kept more explorers from going off their heads with boredom and loneliness, than anything except reading the Bible. We ought to be able to fake something up with a pack of cards and the compass. It's very unlikely that they've seen such things before."

Vic dived his hand into the pocket of his shorts.

"I've got one of those 'put-and-take' teetotum things, if that's any good," he said excitedly.

"Splendid!" Deschamps sorted out all the low-value cards, leaving nothing under seven in the pack. "Now let's get the stage set."

He squatted, cross-legged, on the floor half-facing the door, with Bob and Victor opposite him. Then he arranged the cards in a semi-circle, with the compass in the middle and the teetotum in his fingers.

"Not much, but the best we can do," he remarked, looking round. "We'd better be ready at any moment. The first man to come in here must find me reading the future in the cards. It's a certainty he'll be interested, so he'll come over and watch. I'm depending on the compass and the put-and-take to impress him. It's a long chance, but we must take it. Stand by! I think this is where we make a start."

As he spoke, they heard the heavy bolt outside

the door shoot back with a thump. Two particularly villainous-looking Blue Moors entered, one with a dish of dates that were of the quality normally fed to the camels, and the other with a goat-skin of water. They flung the things on the floor and prepared to leave without a word.

"H'ssh!" whispered Bob, speaking in faltering Arabic. "The Great Diviner and Seer of Visions and the Future divineth and seeth. H'ssh!"

Expressions, first of surprise and then of interest, crossed the faces of the two brigands. They turned back from the doorway and took a couple of steps towards Deschamps who sat, apparently in a trance, with the compass in one hand, staring at the cards spread around him. For a moment or two they watched him in silence and then, leaving the door of the prison wide open, they sat down. Deschamps ignored them completely.

"Fear not," he said impressively to Victor, in Arabic. "For a few hours the shadow of death will hang near thee, but it shall not come to pass. See, the magic pointer points steadily to the Red Emir." This was hardly surprising—the King of Hearts was at the north end of the row of cards. "He will be thy master but thou wilt be his friend, his trusted counsellor. Thy master but yet thy servant, for through his lips thy commands shall

be spoken and with the weight of his authority thy wishes shall be obeyed by his tribes. Those that ill-use or despise thee shall live for a time in a fool's paradise until they have forgotten thee. Then shalt thou return and take a terrible vengeance on them, their sons and their sons' sons."

Deschamps' acting was so superb that it came almost as a shock to Victor to realise that he was only talking nonsense to impress the two brigands.

Bob leaned forward and abased himself until his forehead touched the sand.

"And of me, O Procurer of Favours, Thou Seer of what is Hidden, what seest thou?" In the past few minutes he had scoured his Arabic vocabulary to string the sentence together, but he got it correct.

Still as though he was in a trance, Deschamps rearranged the cards, making mystical and bogus passes with his hands while reciting odd lines of Shakespeare and Latin tags. It was almost as much as Vic could do to keep a straight face as Deschamps once more spread out the cards on the sand. With the air of a grand tragedian he pointed dramatically to each card in turn and began to recite:

*"Ante, apud, ad, adversus,
Circum, Circa, Citra, Cis"*

as though invoking all the Signs of the Zodiac.

Suddenly he stopped.

"I am tired," he announced. "Give me water."

The two brigands did not move, so Vic picked up the goat-skin *gherba* and poured a little into Deschamps' cupped hands.

Then the Frenchman began again.

"Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe . . ."

He broke off and glared at the brigands with fixed and motionless eyeballs. Then he continued solemnly, "Whereupon, which thing having been done, the soldiers, themselves, flung themselves into the river itself. Cæsar, however, himself, however, crossed the Rhine by another bridge and went into winter quarters." The blankness vanished from his eyes and his face darkened with anger. Without warning he shot out an accusing finger at the nearer brigand.

"Thou wouldst dare to bring the shadow of thy evil deeds between me and the Powers that enable me to see what is hidden!" he raged in Arabic. "Begone! Go to him—he whom thou hast so fearfully wronged—give him thy best camel as a peace offering. Bring him to thy house and invite him to partake of the feast of honour. Converse with him how best thou mayest undo

the wrong that thou hast done. Go—and thus avert the black and awful Fate that is even now preparing to leap upon thy back.”

The Blue Moor’s face became green and pale with fright. His eyes bulged out of their sockets.

“Liar!” cried Deschamps in a voice like thunder. “Can I not read thy thoughts, the black and lying denial thy habitually lying lips would speak?”

With a half-gulp, half-sob, and a wail of fear, the man fled. The other brigand regarded Deschamps with a mixture of fear and reverence.

“Of a truth thou art a holy man who can read the secrets of the heart,” he said respectfully. “None but I know that of which thou hast just spoken.”

Deschamps gathered up the cards and gave the man a glance of complete indifference.

“Thou art of no interest to me,” he replied coldly. “Begone!”

Turning his back, he lay down and closed his eyes as though to sleep. The brigand looked worried and perplexed. The prisoner’s clothes, the silver-sheathed dagger at his waist and the silver bangles on his arms, showed him to be a man of substance, if not of importance. Clearly he was unused to being treated as of no conse-

quence. Deschamps' attitude tantalised him. He glanced at Vic and indicated the platter of dates.

"Such are no provender for a Seer," he said awkwardly. "Would he accept a mouthful of food from so lowly a one as I? A few chickens, a dish of boiled wheat, and a roasted lamb, perhaps, with such poor fruits as we possess—a melon or two, some oranges, and perhaps a pomegranate?"

Deschamps sat bolt upright without warning.

"Look into thy heart, thou asp whose venom has gone sour on thee! If thou bringest such food here with thine own hands and without thought of reward, perchance I will accept it and bless thee. But, by my powers of sight and converse with the unseen, if thou bringest it with hope of reward thou thyself shall eat of it and it shall choke thee. Nay, thou crawling seeker of favours, a worse fate than choking shall befall thee. For evermore whatsoever thou puttest into thy mouth, even though it be but a date plucked direct from a tree, shall turn to pork and thou shalt be utterly and for ever defiled. Go, and as thou preparest thyself, so shalt thou receive my blessing or my curse."

The man vanished through the doorway, fear, cupidity, and bewilderment flickering

across his features like the colours in a kaleidoscope.

"A man of very considerable authority here," said Deschamps in a low voice. "I don't remember him when Ronnie and I were here, but he may have been out raiding."

"What makes you think he's important?" asked Bob.

"In the ordinary way there'd be five hundred people trying to peer through that door. There isn't one. Every man, woman, and child in Fachi is simply bursting to have a peep at us. Our guest had so much authority they just don't dare." He chuckled. "We're doing very nicely for three captives, as likely as not earmarked for a sticky end. My magical powers will be known all over the place by now, and if one of the local nobs waits on us with his own hands I imagine that Bohari himself will think twice and wonder whether he's caught a Tartar."

Even as Deschamps spoke, two Senegalese slaves squatted in the sand a couple of yards in front of the doorway and began to make a fire. A moment later the two bandits who had brought the dates and the water came in again. The elder, wealthier man carried a silver tray, with glasses, a tea-pot, sugar, and mint. The other, younger man picked up the dates and water-skin and

carried them out, throwing them to an unseen slave. He came back into the prison and bowed to Deschamps before seating himself.

"Master," he whispered, "I have done it—given him my finest mehari she-camel, the one for which I traded my own goods, not the one I stole in the raid on the Tuareg camp at Tikelt. To-night both he and his son eat the feast of friendship in my house."

Deschamps, who had forgotten most of what he had said in his flow of Arabic, had not the least idea to what the man was actually referring, but he nodded graciously, remarked, "It is well. Let it remain so," and left it at that.

The elder man cleared his throat nervously.

"Learned Marabout," he began, giving Deschamps the most respectful mode of address his language permitted. "I have spoken of you to our revered Sheikh Bohari. He is wroth that that treacherous rogue Atua should have betrayed him into violating so august a Wise Man as yourself, and the personages of your acolytes." He bowed so deferentially towards them that Bob and Victor carefully avoided catching Henri's or each other's eye. In spite of their precarious position Vic felt that his sense of humour, invariably considerable, was being taxed to the limit. "He understood from the unspeakable

Atua that you were but three white men, ordinary travellers, who might fetch a good price in Smara or for trading to the Tuaregs. To-night, I leave with seven others and we shall deal with Atua——”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” interrupted Deschamps with sudden and unwonted grimness. “I’ll deal with Atua myself at a later date.”

Bob and Vic knew that he meant it.

“So be it,” went on the nobleman in the same sycophantic tone. “But our gracious Sheikh must make amends. Chambers in his own house are now, at this moment, being prepared for your reception: there will be slaves, both men and women, boys and girls, selected to wait upon you: a feast worthy of such guests as you will be got ready. Refresh yourselves with tea, my lords, with honey and cakes and cheese, and then ride, not as captives but as honoured guests, through our city to the house of the great and worthy Sheikh Bohari, Kaid and Marabout of Fachi.”

Deschamps nodded casually and glanced through the open doorway. The water for the tea was not yet boiling. He drew the pack of patience cards from his pocket and handed them to Bob.

“Do you remember those card tricks I taught you?” he asked.

Bob nodded.

"Most of them."

"Then persuade this unpleasant bit of work to 'find the lady!'" He lay back again and feigned repose.

Bob, always interested in sleight of hand, had been an apt pupil. He showed three cards—an ace, a queen, and a seven—to the two men. Not once did they discover the position of the queen, even though they sat like hawks ready to pounce, until the slaves called that the water was ready for the tea. The tea was brewed on the doorstep, while the younger man went out, returning a moment later with a great tray of hot cakes, an enormous honeycomb, eggs, and fresh cream cheese. When they had finished eating, superb Tuareg camels swathed in gaudy rugs, and with silver-studded trappings, were brought to the door and made to kneel. They mounted and the nobleman led the way on foot.

They were out of the prison.

CHAPTER IV

“WHILE THERE’S LIFE . . .

THEY made a triumphal procession along the main road that went right through the centre of the town from north to south, dividing it in two, and across the central market-place where it was wide enough for them to ride abreast. All the way along dense crowds acclaimed them.

Bob and Victor were elated, but Henri Deschamps was thoughtful.

“Don’t forget I’ve been here before,” he warned them again. “By the Grace of God, so far I haven’t been recognised, but if I am, we’re out of the frying-pan and into a fiendishly hot fire. They’ll tear us limb from limb. I know this Sheikh, and I’d trust him just as far as I could throw an elephant by its eyelashes. We’ve only got to drop one brick—one pebble even—that can make him suspect we’re not what this avaricious humbug here thinks we are, and we’re for it in no uncertain terms.”

“Don’t get broody,” retorted Bob. “Don’t forget what you said an hour or so ago, on the principle of while there’s life there’s hope!”

“I know, I know,” answered Deschamps. “But for heaven’s sake keep on your toes. I’ve a feeling of unforeseen disaster somewhere ahead.”

“Then you’d better get to work again with the compass and the cards,” said Vic with a grin.

As they came to the great market-place their guide called their attention to the Seven Virgins of Fachi. They halted their camels while they gazed at the enormous girth of the trees.

“They must be unique,” Deschamps told the others. “I never managed to get as near them as this before. They must be seven or eight feet in diameter. There’s nothing like them in the palmery at Marrakech or in the Oasis of Tuatt where the finest dates in North Africa come from.”

“How many *quantles* * does each bear?” he asked the nobleman.

“None whatever,” he replied. “That is why they are called the Seven Virgins.”

“H’m!” said Deschamps, and moved his camel until he was within arm’s length of the nearest trunk. “You can see why, can’t you, Bob?”

Bob scrutinised the enormous palm.

“No,” he replied. “I can’t say I do, off-hand.”

* Unit of weight among Arabs.

"We have a legend," their guide went on. "It is said that in the year that the Virgins bear fruit, the Kaid of Fachi—the Sheikh—will finally conquer the Tuaregs, and we shall be left in peace to grow rich and powerful."

"If you were not all so stupid," said Deschamps bluntly, "if you do as I say, that could be the year after next. Even next year if Allah is merciful and wills it."

Within a few seconds all those within earshot had passed the words on, and a great murmur went up from the crowd gathered in the market square.

"Thou canst even put dates on the Virgins!" cried the village noble incredulously. "*Wallahi*, thou art a marabout indeed."

"I will instruct Sheikh Bohari how it may be done," retorted Deschamps loftily. "Let us ride on."

"That was taking a bit of a risk, wasn't it?" asked Victor.

"I don't think so," the Frenchman replied. "Some time or other they've welded copper bands round the trees about ten feet up. Goodness knows why. Probably to hang awnings or something on. Cupric poisoning from those bands is killing the fruit and sooner or later it'll kill the trees. Take the bands off, water the roots

with brine, and they’ll bear fruit. They’d have died years ago if it wasn’t for the fact that date sap is almost stationary.”

It was easy enough for Bob and Victor to pick out the house of the Sheikh. The great front gate of the courtyard stood wide open, surmounted by a green flag with the crescent of Islam. The Sheikh himself, his Council of Elders arranged on either side, waited in front to greet them.

“Here goes!” Deschamps muttered to his companions, and urged his camel a length ahead. As he brought it to its knees preparatory to dismounting, Sheikh Bohari stepped forward and prostrated himself.

“That I should take thee by force and in ignorance cast thee into my prison!” he wailed. “My brother, in the name of the Prophet, forgive me!”

“Even the greatest of men can commit an error,” replied Deschamps. “It is forgiven. The Spirits of the Great and Learned Ones who ever guard and bow before the Holy Place in Mecca warned me to expect a moment of stupidity. It is finished.”

The Sheikh looked embarrassed.

“Forgive me again, O holy and learned brother! But thy name, thy name?”

Deschamps smiled graciously.

"I am Seyyid el Akbar el Mohammed, Emir of Ouazat, Sheikh of Mizota, and Lord of the Great Salt Plain. My followers, Abdullah el Bob and Hamed al Fiq, are my nephews from Ouazat and journey whither I journey and go whither I go."

The Sheikh saluted them and turned to present his Council. Deschamps cut him short.

"I am tired," he announced. "I and my nephews would sleep before we feast and make merry."

The Sheikh motioned his Elders to stand aside. One of them, a swarthy beetle-browed brute of a man with a strong cast of Berber in his features, scowled at them as they passed.

"Strange that such great and holy men should wear the shirts and clothes of the accursed Unbelievers," he commented audibly. "Why wear they not the garments of the Faithful as ordained by the Prophet?"

The three white men were quick to sense the sudden unfriendly silence; this was a moment they had hoped would never come. Vic, whose Arabic was more fluent than Bob's, reacted first.

"Bring that man here," he snapped at the Sheikh. The Sheikh, still impressed and overawed by what he had heard of Deschamps' super-

natural powers, obeyed unthinkingly. The man came forward, sulky and resentful that his comment had been overheard.

“Ignorant fool,” said Vic. “Where we have journeyed to have dressed otherwise would have resulted in imprisonment or even death. What knowest thou of the plans unfolded to Seers for the creation of an Empire of the Faithful? Even that arch-traitor, Atua, did not pierce our disguise and sold us as travelling white men. Us! And our robes he stole with our baggage and our camels. Our uncle’s curse be on him!”

The counsellor’s face darkened with anger at being spoken to in such a way by a boy. His lips drew back in an ugly snarl to make some reply when the Sheikh cut him short.

“Begone to thy shop, dog, and fetch thy finest silks and woollen cloths. Bring thy three most skilful tailors that these holy men may be arrayed again as true sons of the Prophet ere night-fall.”

With a venomous scowl the man went.

“That was a near thing,” said Bob as they settled down in the room the Sheikh had had made ready. “Oh, for a proper bath and a night between sheets!”

“Those confounded tailors’ll be here at any moment,” said Deschamps. “We can do with

the clothes, anyway. They'll be useful for when we get to Smara."

Bohari came in, followed by the discredited counsellor and a host of slaves and tailors carrying bales of coloured silk and pure white woollen cloth. For half an hour they wrangled and discussed the merits of the various materials over cups of sweet syrupy coffee. At last Deschamps stood up to be measured. Two young boys, sons of the chief tailor, helped him to remove his shirt. As he stood there, naked to the waist, the counsellor leapt forward and his dagger pricked the Frenchman over the heart.

"Look!" he cried. "The learned and holy Emir of Ouazat and Sheikh of Mizota! They are unbelieving dogs and eaters of pork! Look!"

His finger, quivering with hate and fury, pointed to a tiny crucifix that hung suspended round Henri Deschamps' neck.

For a few seconds there was tense, thunder-struck silence, and then nightmare pandemonium broke loose. Some, the supporters of the counsellor who had insulted them at the gate and who was now restored to favour, desired to kill them at once. For some minutes things looked black indeed. Others, who supported Bohari, were averse to an immediate sentence of death; and at last the influence and counsels of the Sheikh's

party prevailed. Yet, for all that, Bohari was by far their most dangerous enemy.

The Sheikh flung himself back on a pile of cushions and glared at the prisoners with blood-shot, pig-like eyes that seemed to Bob to glow almost red with hate. The ropes that now bound their arms bit savagely into the flesh, and their bodies were streaked and smeared with blood from countless scars and scratches caused by angry vicious finger-nails when they had been seized and hurled to the ground.

Bob breathed a prayer for help. Heaven knew what horror, torture, and death awaited them . . . and Vic was as aware of the fact as he was. Vic, his kid brother, who was only just fourteen. . . . If only some opportunity, some hope, no matter how slender, presented itself for Vic to escape, Bob would willingly sacrifice his life to let him make the most of that chance. He glanced covertly and affectionately at Vic—and was proud of him. Vic was pale—they all were, if it came to that, including the indomitable Henri—but his square jaw was set like a rock and his hazel eyes stared back at their captors, cool, unflinching and resolute. The likeness to Ronnie was startling. Henri Deschamps saw it, too, and a pang of anxiety gripped him. If Bohari noticed it he could not but realise that the boys were brothers,

and then the Sheikh's recognition of himself could not be long delayed. Their deaths, probably by torture and in long-drawn-out agony, which Vic would be compelled to witness, would be the inevitable result. Without his experience and knowledge of the desert and the desert tribesmen, Vic and Bob would be helpless and without a chance.

There was a sudden stir by the door at the far end of the room. The wealthy nobleman who had visited them in the prison, and who had been their self-appointed ambassador to the Sheikh, was led in, his wrists bound, his clothing torn and his head-dress awry. Every face except Bohari's was automatically turned in his direction. With a sudden tautening of his muscles, Henry Deschamps realised that the Sheikh was staring intently at Vic, his face twitching with fury and foam drooling from the corners of his mouth.

"Bring hither Ali-the-wall-eyed-barber and his razors," he screamed, and leapt to his feet. Crossing the floor in three strides, he gripped the Frenchman by the beard, tugging and jerking his jaws apart with such blind fury that the boys feared that their leader's neck would be dislocated. The room echoed with the stream of insane, vituperant curses that poured unchecked from the Sheikh's foam-flecked lips. At last, ex-

hausted by his own violence, he desisted and his voice trailed away in an inarticulate squeak. The ordeal of those few minutes had been so terrifying that for the moment it had dimmed the knowledge of their common danger. Vic saw that beads of perspiration were pouring down his brother’s forehead and blinding him. Then he realised that he himself was bathed from head to foot with cold sweat.

Willing, mocking hands propelled the new victim forward, until Bohari saw him. The Sheikh moved towards him, slowly and menacingly, his ugly yellow teeth exposed like a mad dog’s and his long arms hanging loosely at his sides. For a second he stared horribly at the miserable prisoner and then, with a cruel slash with the edge of his palm, hit him viciously across the mouth.

“Behold thy great and holy marabout!” he mocked. “Look at the learned Seer with whom the spirits of the departed Holy Men of Islam hold converse! Sons of pigs and eaters of pork; dogs and the sons of dogs; spies, offal, and Unbelievers are they! Look at this inspired one who can read the future—a camel-thief and an escaped slave! Now what sayest thou, O Abdullah, my one-time friend and counsellor?”

The menace in the last question was appalling,

but Abdullah stood his ground unflinchingly. With all his faults it was clear the man did not lack courage.

"I am, and always have been, thy friend, O Sheikh," he retorted firmly. "Whether or no I am thy counsellor is for thee alone to decide. Of the other matters, I believe them not. With my own eyes and my own ears have I had proof of these men's power. Thou speakest in ignorance of their magic which thou hast not seen."

The other counsellors were impressed by the man's speech and bearing, even if the Sheikh was too intoxicated with rage to listen.

"You would make me a fool and become the laughing stock of Fachi!" he stormed, striking the defenceless man again and again. "I, the Kaid, the Sheikh, welcome a slave and camel-thief with feasts and carpets and new robes! You would make me to welcome unbelieving dogs as my brother sheikhs and bring their foul, defiling bodies to contaminate my house! For this shall pagan slaves sew thee in the skin of a pig and roast thee alive above a slow red fire."

Abdullah blanched beneath his dark skin but showed no other sign of fear.

"May it be as Allah wills!" he averred with quiet dignity. "If I have wronged thee, ya Sheikh, I have wronged thee in innocence.

Therefore if thou condemnest me to die such a death I shall be condemned undeservedly. Therefore I shall not be defiled by contact with the pig. By the mercy of Allah and the power of Mohammed, his Prophet, I shall attain the joys of Paradise unsullied and be welcomed. But you” —his voice rose commandingly — “drunken with wrath and injured pride as though with wine, will therefore sin and be damned.”

“He’s got some guts!” Bob muttered admiringly, and there was a murmur of approbation from the other Elders. Bohari was swift to sense the opposition.

“Maybe, maybe!” he answered. “Men have died in Fachi for lesser crimes than that of making their Kaid look a fool. Remember that while you await your sentence. Perchance I will be merciful and sell you to the Tuaregs. But of these unbelieving dogs, he at least shall die under the knives of the women and girls.” He pointed a palsied finger at Deschamps. “Unless, perchance, the powers of the Unseen Ones can save him from that fate,” he added with contemptuous irony.

“Beware, O Sheikh, and mock him not!” cried Abdullah. “I tell you I have seen and heard what they can do. They are men of power.”

"Here goes!" whispered Deschamps to the others. "May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb." He strode forward and faced the Sheikh. "Hearken, you crowing dunghill cockerel! Raise thy voice, make a noise in thy little world, strut and swagger and fight while thou canst! Who knows that by to-night some hand stronger than thy puny self may not grasp thee, wring thy squawking neck and sling thee to slaves to be thrown as a meal to the village dogs?" He thrust his face menacingly close to the Sheikh's. "Dost thou know? No! But I whom thou despiseth and would send to death, I know. Strut, crow, and make merry, for thy days are almost at an end. Already vulture whispereth to vulture to make ready for thy rotting carcase."

Deschamps turned abruptly and walked back to his place. There was complete and utter silence in the room. The confident, determined prophecy of a man—a reputed Seer—under sentence of death, awoke fanatical superstitious dread in every man present. The fiercely spoken words shook even Sheikh Bohari himself.

From the densely crowded market-place outside came a din that penetrated the thick walls of the Sheikh's house. From the direction of the Mosque came the deep reverberating boom of an immense gong.

A man burst unceremoniously into the room.

“To arms! To arms! The Tuaregs are upon us!”

Vic’s wits worked quickly.

“Vulture whispereth to vulture!” he mocked the Sheikh.

“Thank heaven!” muttered Deschamps.
“That’s saved our bacon.” He pitched forward in a dead faint.

CHAPTER V

THE VULTURES WHISPER

FOR the remainder of the day the noise of battle raged round the southern and eastern walls of the town. Now the advantage lay with the Tuaregs, now with the stubborn defenders. Women, children, the aged, and the sick were herded into the great market-place beneath the Seven Virgins.

Bob, Victor, Deschamps, and Abdullah had been imprisoned afresh in a room at the top of the Sheikh's house, from which a sheer drop of forty feet to the ground below made any thought of escape impossible. They stood in a group at the window, watching the distant fighting. As darkness fell the battle died down and then ceased as both sides withdrew to rest and regroup their forces for the next day's struggle. Leaving sufficient men to guard the walls against a surprise night attack, the men of Fachi trooped back to their homes, ready at a moment's notice to rejoin the fray.

The unexpected and entirely fortuitous confirmation of Deschamps' prophecy had convinced Abdullah and the Sheikh's Council of his occult

power. Yet while Bob and Victor were both elated at the result, Deschamps himself realised that the bluff, although successful so far, could well act as a boomerang to their undoing. It was a difficult and dangerous pose to keep up.

Abdullah turned away from the window and followed them into the room.

"Will the slaughter be great when Fachi falls and the Sheikh is killed to-morrow?" he demanded suddenly.

Deschamps had already explained to the others that the battle had not, up to now, gone too well for the defenders, and Abdullah's unexpected confirmation of this opinion did little to cheer them up.

"Why should the town fall to-morrow?" replied Deschamps.

"Two reasons," said Abdullah. "One, we are short of both powder and shot as we used too much the last time we raided the Oasis of Q'ada, and have not yet had time to replace it. Secondly, the Sheikh, who generally leads a sortie in person, has missed two opportunities to attack this afternoon. You must have seen that for yourself. The last one might have turned the battle. Your prophecy has frightened him badly, very badly. He's avoiding danger."

Deschamps nodded.

"Thus will you see my words fulfilled. The

Sheikh's own cowardice will bring about his death. But fear not, the Veiled Men will not capture the town."

Abdullah looked relieved and relapsed into silence.

"This fortune-telling business is getting past a joke," Deschamps said to the others in English. "We'll come unstuck on it sooner or later. Up to now our luck's been phenomenal but it won't—it can't—last for ever." He began to pull his upper lip thoughtfully. "What a fool I am!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'd forgotten all about it. I wonder what's happened to them."

"Happened to what?" asked Bob.

"Our pistols," Deschamps returned. "When Ronnie and I got caught we both had Lügers and two spare magazines fully loaded. Friend Bohari took the lot. I wonder what he's done with them?"

"He hadn't got one on when he went to the south gate," said Vic. "I'm pretty certain of that. I noticed his weapons particularly. He'd a prehistoric old 'gas pipe' and a revolver stuck in his belt that he must have picked up after the Charge of the Light Brigade."

"Your history's weak," said his brother. "That took place in Russia, not the Sahara."

"Strange to say, it's not impossible," put in

Deschamps. "After the Crimean War the Turks bought up enormous quantities of arms lost or captured by both sides. At that time most of North Africa was part of the Ottoman Empire and the weapons gradually found their way all over Egypt, Libya, and the Desert. Even to-day you'll find any amount of tribesmen with Russian and British rifles of the 1850's."

"Those two Lügers would come in very handy if we could lay hands on them," said Bob thoughtfully. "I wonder if Stick-in-the-mud here knows anything about them."

"We'll ask him, anyway. These back-o'-beyond people are scared stiff of using automatic weapons. They can't understand them."

But when questioned Abdullah denied all knowledge of even having heard of them.

There was the shuffle of bare feet on the stairs outside, and the Sheikh came in. Deschamps went straight in to the attack.

"Do the vultures whisper louder, O Sheikh? Are they stretching their wings, making ready to fly? Is the powder and shot beginning to fail? Leading a sortie through the great gate loses savour when the vultures are in the sky, does it not, O Sheikh?"

The four captives chuckled at the Sheikh's discomfiture.

"Peace and the blessing of Allah be upon you," he exclaimed. "I have come to acknowledge my fault. Thou art indeed a Man of Power, a Seer. Tell me how to rid the walls of these Veiled Terrors from the Land of Thirst, and you shall go free. More, use thy gifts and powers against them and thou shalt have houses and lands, camels and servants, and be honoured in my town."

His smooth words were belied by his cruel and shifty eyes.

"Nothing could be easier," retorted Deschamps carelessly. "If these are the men of the Haggaren I would only have to tell them who I am, and such is my influence over them that they would go. But if they are the men of Q'ada, they have a score to settle first—an account of some six weeks' standing. I could make them give you honourable terms and prevent pillage, massacre, and fire. But the vultures in the sky are sent there by the All-just Judgment of Allah. With their destiny—and yours—I may not trifle."

The little doorway was jammed with tribesmen armed to the teeth, and a low murmur went through their ranks. A gaunt old warrior, lithe and sinewy as a gazelle in spite of his eighty years, stepped forward, leaning on his rifle. His green turban was mute evidence of his seventh

pilgrimage to Mecca and his claim, because of that, to the title of Hadji.

"By noon to-morrow we will have to take to our daggers," he announced. "If Allah wills we may each kill one before our turn comes . . . for our rifles are finished. Free us this once and by the Beard of the Prophet Himself I swear that you may all live here in peace, honoured and unmolested, whether you be Believers or Unbelievers, and be free to go your way whenever you choose." He glanced towards the Elders and the tribesmen at the door. "That we will swear solemnly on the Koran, will we not?"

A loud murmur of assent came from the others.

"This infernal fortune-telling," muttered Deschamps. "Where on earth is it going to end? We'll finish up on the Seven Virgins as a gallows if anything goes wrong."

"Not if we get those pistols," said Bob.

"We will consider your appeal," Deschamps told them. "Send us food and come back in an hour for our answer."

"Just a minute," put in Vic suddenly. "Tell them that Abdullah here must have a free-pardon for treading on the Sheikh's corns, and that he must be freed at once. Warn him that if he's to continue in our favour he's to have a pretty successful snoop round for those two Lügers."

"Good idea," said Bob, and Deschamps nodded.

"Right, I agree. We'll talk to him while we're waiting for the food and then make it one of the conditions on which we help them in the morning."

As soon as the room was empty they explained to Abdullah what they wanted him to do. This time, they noticed, the door was left open and unguarded. No eavesdroppers loitered on the stairway. Within the half-hour came slaves with food—a roast shoulder of lamb, boiled wheat, and oranges—while other servants brought rugs, cushions, and blankets. A moment later the green-turbaned old greybeard came to enquire whether all was to their satisfaction. He was, Abdullah informed them, the Sheikh's uncle and, as Allah had denied the Sheikh the blessing of a son, he was heir to both the Kaidship and Sheikhdom. Fierce and implacable as the old man was, honesty and straightforward dealing radiated from him. On his own responsibility he set Abdullah free. When Deschamps stipulated that the pardon should be confirmed immediately by the Sheikh, as Kaid, the old man gave a snort of contempt more eloquent than any words.

"I am old enough," he said grimly, "to know that nothing is impossible." His thin, close-shut

lips twitched in an ambiguous smile. "Even a vulture might fly at night."

"Poor little Princes in the Tower!" remarked Vic cryptically, as they listened to the old man and Abdullah descending the staircase. "It was their uncle, too, wasn't it?"

"If these chaps outside are the Haggaren," Deschamps began, "I can probably persuade them to pack up and go home. I was on pretty friendly terms with them during the war and they did some very useful work helping General Leclerc's column in their dash from Lake Chad to Tobruk. They helped us quite a lot, raiding Eye-tye outposts in Southern Tripolitania and other places, wrecking wells and so forth. Most of them either know me or know of me. But if they're the Q'ada people, the going's likely to be a bit stickier. They've got their knife well and truly into the Blue Moors and they'll require some pretty tactful handling. Still, I've got a certain trump card I can play. . . . The main difficulty is to prevent either lot from planting a bullet into me before I've identified myself. Flags of truce coming out of Fachi are liable to be looked on askance. They've been caught that way once too often in the past."

"On the other hand, if they're the Mohurren tribes from the west of Adrar, we've had it!" he

went on after a pause. "No man on earth can handle them. They're untamable."

"Why not ask the slaves there?" suggested Bob, indicating the three men who had brought the food and were now squatting in silence against the wall.

"They wouldn't be much help," replied Henri. "Each man of them had his tongue cut out when he was captured. They're dumb. Lessens the risk of treachery, I suppose. It's the usual practice."

Vic, thinking of his brother Ronnie, felt sick.

Punctual almost to the minute, Sheikh Bohari, his uncle, the Council of Elders, and Abdullah trooped up the stairway and arranged themselves comfortably on the floor. They sat in silence and waited expectantly for the white men to speak.

"First of all," demanded Deschamps without preamble, "from what region are these Tuaregs? Are they the Haggaren, the Q'ada, or the Mohurren?"

"From the villages around Q'ada," replied the Sheikh.

Deschamps nodded. He had hoped that they would turn out to be the Haggaren, but even the Q'ada were better than the Mohurren.

"Is this feud and bickering between you of long

standing? Or is it just a case of retaliation for your raid six weeks ago?"

The Council of Elders looked at each other uncomfortably.

"It is not of long standing," hedged the Sheikh. "It is not a blood feud nor come down from father to son."

Deschamps squatted upright, his knees doubled beneath him, Arab fashion. His tone and air of authority were those of a magistrate.

"Then why did you raid? What reason had you for doing so?" he demanded sharply.

Again the majority of Elders looked uncomfortable and avoided his eyes: the remainder stared back with a look of mulish obstinacy.

"Well?" The query sounded as though the Frenchman not only waited for an answer but intended to get one.

The old Hadji raised his fearless and imperious gaze.

"We were in need of camels and they had plenty. Our pastures had been scorched up in the drought and our sheep were naught but bone and gristle. Theirs were fat. They had been trading their asses for cloth in Timimoun. We would have had to do the same, either there or in Marrakech. They had sixty bales of cloth with them, enough for our needs for this year

and next. Of course we raided them! We'd have been fools if we hadn't. . . . Allah sends not such plunder every day."

The others seemed to approve of the old man's succinct way of putting the matter.

Deschamps made a gesture of contempt.

"Thou, at any rate, art old enough to know better," he remarked scornfully. "For a few camels, a flock of sheep, and some bales of cloth, you are content to risk attack upon your *kasbah*, and the lives of your sons, in defending it. You lay yourselves open, if it be the will of Allah that you suffer defeat, to have your homes burnt down, your wives and daughters taken as slaves, your flocks and herds driven off, your dates and your grain pillaged, and those of you that are not slaughtered, left to die of thirst and starvation! You utter fools! As the Christians say: 'They that take the sword shall perish with the sword,' and 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'" For a minute or so he affected to study the swinging of the compass needle, holding it under the rush lights so that the Elders could see it. Then he looked up sharply as though displeased by what he saw. "Thou, O Sheikh Bohari, didst thou lead the thieving raid on the Oasis at Q'ada? Nay, deny it not, for this finger of truth points thee out. Give me thy dagger that

I may divine just how great was thy people's need of camels and mutton and cloth."

The Sheikh passed over the dagger with a hand that trembled. The swinging of a compass needle was something completely beyond his ken. By means of the steel blade Deschamps deflected the needle first to the east and then to the west, releasing it suddenly each time so that it swung back to its original position.

"So it was thy greed, O Sheikh, and not thy subjects' need that made thee raid the Q'ada!" he thundered, and turned sharply to Abdullah. "You heard me in the prison this morning foretell your fates from the red and the black pictures. Tell these dolts what I prophesied."

"Thou saidest a black and terrible fate."

"I did," Deschamps agreed grimly. "Keep silent, while the pictures speak to me again." Once more he laid out the cards and pretended to study them. "Their words and omens are not good," he said slowly after a moment's pause. "Send thou a herald to their Chief and beseech him to accept terms. Then I will confer with him. Insh'allah,* all will be well."

"What about those two pistols?" whispered Vic, leaning forward. Deschamps nodded brusquely to show he had not forgotten.

* If God wills.

The members of the Council jabbered together in undertones.

"By day a herald would be honourably received in the enemy's camp," said a fat, shifty-eyed merchant, when they had finished. "But at night his head would be lopped from his shoulders before they realised who he was."

Bob guessed correctly that the Council had nominated the speaker as their ambassador to the enemy, and that he was not too keen on the task.

"Send him at the first light of dawn," replied Deschamps.

"And now, O Sheikh," he went on sharply, "when I fell from the machine-that-crosses-the-sky-like-a-thunderbolt, together with he whom thou sent to Smara, I had a pistol which thou didst steal. Give it back to me and also the one belonging to him who came with me."

Sheikh Bohari spread his hands in a gesture of regret.

"Alas, I sold them to a passing traveller on his way from Atar to Ksar-es-Souk."

Again Deschamps glanced at the compass and the cards. He stood up abruptly.

"Swear that on the Koran and by the Beard of the Prophet," he said quietly, yet so that every man in the room heard his words. "Do that,

and then I shall know that the pictures and the pointer-to-truth have played me false."

Bohari stared at him malevolently.

"I will so swear it if you wish," he gulped.

" 'And Amen stuck in my throat,' " quoted Bob.

Deschamps took a place nearer the Sheikh.

" 'Whatsoever a man sowest, that shall he also reap,' " he reminded him. "Lies and treachery beget their own kind. Remember, the vultures whisper, stretch their wings, and wait impatiently for dawn."

Without a word Bohari left the room and descended the stairway. The Council followed, the aged Hadji bringing up the rear. He stalked past the three white men without a word, but he caught their eyes and jerked his head towards the place where he had been sitting. Half hidden by the cushion against which he had propped himself were two silver-mounted daggers that had been thrust in his belt.

Bob drew one from its sheath and tested the razor-like blade with his thumb-nail.

"Somehow," he remarked, "I don't fancy that old chap trusts his charming nephew any more than we do."

"Yes," said Deschamps. "I wonder what the old boy expects to happen."

Vic went quietly to the door and tried the latch. It was unfastened and the door itself swung readily open. He peered over the railings outside and reported that as far as he could see they had been left unguarded.

"Right!" said Deschamps decisively. "You two take the old man's toothpicks. If we meet any rough stuff you may find 'em useful."

"But what about you?" queried Vic. "You haven't a weapon at all."

The Frenchman grinned and flexed the muscles of his lean, sinewy arms.

"You needn't worry," he said. "I've had a pretty thorough grounding in unarmed combat and ju-jitsu. I'll probably manage to hold my own in a rough-house. Come on!"

They crept silently down the stairway. As Vic had surmised, it was completely unguarded. They halted at the foot and stood listening.

"Queer," whispered Bob. "There's not a sound that I can hear."

"No," replied Deschamps. "I don't like it. Ronnie and I walked into a trap because I didn't bother to put two and two together. That Sheikh's no mean psychologist. I wonder what dirty game he's up to now."

The whole house seemed as silent as the grave. Even the servants' quarters were deserted. A

low door in the outer wall of the kitchen hung open. They peered out and found themselves in a narrow slit of a lane that ran down the side of the house from the market-place.

"Stay here," said Deschamps in a low voice. "I'm more used to this sort of thing than you are. I'll do a five minutes' race up to the market and come back. Hang on!"

He vanished with startling suddenness into the darkness. It was ten, not five minutes before he reappeared with equal abruptness.

"Back—up to the room," he whispered urgently. "There's been a committee meeting out in the front. I've listened to quite a bit of it. Tell you when we get there."

They were only just in time. Even as they mounted the staircase, three steps at a time, they heard the front door creak open and voices in the passage below.

"What happened?" asked Vic as they flung themselves on the rugs that were still spread over the floor and tucked the daggers away out of sight.

"The Sheikh and the fat merchant who insulted us this morning want to double-cross us by getting us down ostensibly to treat with the Tuaregs and then use us as a bribe," Deschamps began. "They'll hand us over as slaves if the Tuaregs will only push off. If it was the

Haggaren we had to deal with, and not the Q'ada, we could have no end of fun, but the Q'ada are queer fish. I think I can handle them but I'm not a hundred per cent certain. They've got a nasty streak of treachery in them—they'll do the bidding of the highest payer. The old Hadji—the Sheikh's uncle—and Abdullah lead the opposition. That old boy is very much on our side and he's got a lot of influence in the town if not on the Council. He wants us to get a square deal. After all, he made us certain promises. Abdullah is on our side whole-heartedly but only because the poor sap is absolutely and completely convinced that we really are magicians. You ought to have heard his version of the three-card trick, Bob! According to him, if you ever get back home you'll send Maskelyne bankrupt."

"Who won, anyway?" asked Bob. "The Sheikh or the Opposition?"

"I'm none too sure either way." Deschamps sounded worried. "The Council of Elders are in favour of doing the dirty on us, but they're scared of the old uncle's influence among the tribesmen. His green head-dress and his seven pilgrimages to Mecca cut a lot of ice with these fanatics. His nephew may be both Kaid and Sheikh—a pretty rare and powerful combination—but if the old man got sufficiently uppish to start a revolution,

sixty per cent of the rank and file would side with him. The Hadji's a straightforward honest-to-goodness desert bandit, who'll raid, plunder, ravish, and torture anyone and anywhere in the name of the Prophet and for the glory of Islam. But after you've made allowances for that he's as straight-dealing as his epileptic nephew is crooked. If Bohari decides to run athwart his uncle, he'll have to do it very diplomatically. To-morrow ought to be interesting."

Vic grunted.

"H'm! Sufficient unto the day, etcetera. Personally I suggest we take it in turn to keep watch. It might solve a few of the Sheikh's worries if we woke up in the morning and found our throats cut from ear to ear."

Deschamps laughed.

"I quite agree. You go first: I'll do the middle one and Bob do the last. Two hours on and four off. We haven't got a watch between us now, but you can judge it near enough by the position of the Plough. Talking about the Sheikh's worries—those vultures of mine have got him pretty jittery, I'm glad to say."

Bob rolled over.

"You know, Henri, there's something about you when you speak to Bohari about those vultures that makes me think you don't like the

man. You're so horribly convincing about them anyone would think you knew for certain that the blackguard's number is really up to-morrow."

For a moment an expression of flint-like inflexibility of purpose was stamped on Henri Deschamps' clear-cut features.

"It is," he assured them quietly. "You saw him when they found my crucifix: you heard the plans he had for our disposal. If he can sell us as slaves for the Tuareg salt-mines, he will. He's tortured me with pincer-ants once already, and what he's done to or with your brother we can only guess and hope we're wrong. This is French territory and when we've got Ronnie, friend Bohari is coming back to Marrakech where he'll be tried for his crimes, brought back here and hanged from the Seven Virgins. The vultures are whispering all right."

Bob opened his eyes again.

"I'm sorry, Henri, but I think I told you once before—the day you caught us up in Huntingdon. If Ronnie's had a hair of his head hurt you won't take Sheikh Bohari to Marrakech. Not alive, anyhow." A moment later he was asleep.

The first pale silver streaks of a new day were faintly visible in the east as Deschamps heard stealthy footsteps on the stairs below, and woke the other two. Abdullah sidled into the room,

holding his finger to his lips for silence. He fumbled for a moment beneath his cloak and then held out a Luger pistol.

"Bohari hid it last night beneath the grain sacks in the store-house," he whispered. "Ali the cloth merchant has the other." He departed as stealthily as he had come.

Deschamps removed the magazine, pulled back the breech and, taking the weapon nearer to the rush light, peered at the number.

"Ronnie's," he said shortly. "You'd better have it, Bob."

Bob hid the ugly-looking weapon beneath his shirt in silence.

When the silver reflection of the dawn had become tinted with pink, slaves padded softly up the stairway bearing tea, eggs, and bread, still hot and powdered with ash from the fire. Sheikh Bohari and his uncle, the Hadji, appeared a few moments later and were followed almost immediately by Ali, the cloth merchant, and Abdullah. Although he was clearly uneasy and shifty in his manner, Bohari came straight to the point.

"If you will go to the Q'ada and persuade them by your power to return to their villages, I will recompense both you and them. My holy uncle, the Hadji, will go with you beyond the gates. A

herald has been sent, asking their Chief to parley with us."

"Understand this," said Deschamps firmly. "If I make terms with the Q'ada, those terms must be carried out to the last detail. If they are not, I shall not stir my little finger to save you or your people from the wrath of the Q'ada."

The Sheikh bowed.

"Whatsoever you arrange shall be done. Do I not send my uncle with you as proof of my good faith?"

"Better proof would be your own person," retorted Deschamps. "Are you not Kaid of Fachi?"

Bohari looked away uneasily, his eyes shiftier than ever.

"Never before have the people of Fachi agreed to terms. Until to-day we have dictated them," he mumbled. "The common people murmur and there may be trouble. It is better that I stay here with my finger on the pulse of public feeling."

"The people should not have much difficulty in realising that it's because you're short of ammunition," said Deschamps bluntly. "They are not fools, and they are skilled in war."

"The people murmur because they maintain your presence in the town has brought misfortune," put in the cloth merchant smoothly.

"They maintain you should be put to death. But we, the Council of Elders, are wiser men than they. We know that in your power lies our one hope. The noble Hadji has great influence in the town. The people trust him. Therefore it is better that you and he should treat with our enemies."

Deschamps looked at the proud green-turbaned old warrior, who stood silent and aloof from his nephew.

"There's more in this than meets the eye," the Frenchman whispered to Bob. "I will go with the old man but I think you two had better stop and keep an eye on Bohari. I can talk to the Q'ada better alone, anyway." He signalled to the Hadji. "Come, let us go."

Two hours later they returned. The Tuaregs' terms were not unreasonable. Five camels for every four stolen, their flocks returned, with an ass for every three sheep killed or otherwise missing, every bale of cloth that could be found in Fachi, and as many dates as could be carried on fifty camels.

Bohari realised that they had got off lightly, and said so. Ali, the hardest hit and the one with the most loot to disgorge, g'bbled with rage.

"Was the White Magician's reputation known to the Q'ada?" Bohari asked his uncle.

"It was indeed," replied the old man. "To them he was as a leader, one inspired of Allah, a Prophet. He has been their friend for years."

Ali, the cloth merchant, bounded to his feet, his face convulsed with fury.

"I knew it! I knew it!" he screamed. "It was a trap to sell us to the Q'ada. They are spies, not magicians."

He jerked the other Luger from his belt and pointed it blindly at Deschamps as he pressed the trigger. Simultaneously the Hadji's foot shot out, kicking the weapon aside. The bullet, which must otherwise inevitably have entered Deschamps' vitals, ricocheted from the floor. Abdullah shrieked as Bohari pitched face foremost across his legs. The bullet had found a billet, and half of Sheikh Bohari's skull was missing.

Ali gazed at his grisly handiwork and then leaned against the wall with a low wail of horror.

Deschamps' prophecy had indeed come true. So far as Bohari was concerned, the vultures had whispered, spread their wings, and flown towards him.

CHAPTER VI

THE BUYER OF SLAVES

THE death of Sheikh Bohari seemed to bring an air of relief to the population. The aged Hadji took over his duties with vigour, and within an hour he had made some drastic changes in the membership of the Council of Elders. Ali, the cloth merchant, and a number of others who had been particular favourites found themselves deposed.

“It is a pity that the death of my nephew was accidental,” said the Hadji regretfully. “I should like to have Ali hanged.”

True to his promises, the old man provided the white men with a house and servants. Their camels were restored to them and as they were penniless they were to regard themselves as the Hadji's guests. They were free to come and go as they chose. The Q'ada, too, kept honourably to their agreement. They remained outside the walls only long enough to collect their spoils under the peace terms, and then rode away with the same hurricane speed as that with which they had attacked. Rather than risk any un-

toward incident which might have embarrassed or compromised Deschamps and the two boys in Fachi, the Tuaregs declined an invitation to the customary Feast of Truce.

Towards evening the trio sat on the shady side of their new quarters, discussing immediate plans.

"The first thing," Bob was saying, "is to get away from here and on to Smara."

"And we can't do that until we've raked another outfit together," Deschamps pointed out. "Clothes and money are our chief trouble. As regards food we could get through on dates, bread and water. Camels we have already."

"I agree with Bob," said Vic slowly. "Could we make a dash after your Q'ada friends, Henri, and borrow what we need from them?"

"Why not try touching Abdullah for what we need?" suggested Bob. "He seems pretty much on our side and after all he owes us a good deal, one way and another. He'd have been as dead as mutton by now if it hadn't been for us."

Vic nodded.

"Yes, he doesn't seem a bad sort in spite of his shifty eyes and villainous appearance. He's got guts, anyway. Look at the way he stood up to Bohari."

"He's brave all right," agreed Deschamps. "All these people are, if it comes to that. But

somehow I feel that Abdullah is out for himself. He's got some scheme at the back of his head that involves our co-operation. He thinks we'll be useful, so he wants to keep on the right side of us. I don't trust him an inch.^o In fact I wouldn't trust one of them except the old man."

"What about trying my suggestion to chase after the Q'ada?" Vic asked.

"They've got a thirty-mile start and their camels can travel like the wind. I doubt if we'd ever catch up with them."

Abdullah came in through the doorway, crossed the open courtyard, and squatted down beside them.

"You must have driven your camels pretty hard," he remarked. "The Kaid ordered me to see they were looked after and I inspected them this afternoon. They need a long rest and feeding up, so I've sent them off to pasturage with some of mine for a few weeks."

"The deuce you have!" exclaimed Bob in English.

"The pasturage," Abdullah went on with a sly look, "is quite close—about four days' march away."

"*Um!*" mused Deschamps. "It bears out what I was just saying. To all intents and purposes we're prisoners again."

They talked the situation over once more when the Fachi nobleman had departed. Soon after sundown a messenger came across from the Hadji inviting them to eat *kibab* and roast lamb with him. ‘

“I can’t help thinking,” remarked Vic, “that the best plan would be to get the Hadji to send a messenger across country to Mogador. Speaking from memory, it’s the nearest place with a branch of the Morocco State Bank and they ought to be notified that Atua and Hamedra are roaming around loose with a letter of credit of yours worth a hundred thousand francs, and three books of travellers’ cheques worth ten thousand each.”

“They can’t cash ‘em,” said Bob. “They’re all payable to ‘Self only.’”

“I know that,” retorted his brother as they strolled through the dim mysterious streets towards Hadji’s residence. “But they’ve also got our passports and there are a considerable number of nimble-fingered gentry of doubtful antecedents in Marrakech, Fez, and Casablanca who’d pay a good price for the swag, skip over to Algeria and cash in. They’re payable anywhere, remember.”

“Vic, I think you’ve hit the bull’s-eye,” exclaimed Deschamps, slapping him on the shoulder. “Until you mentioned Mogador I’d clean forgotten—I’ve got some money in one of the banks

there left over from before the war. I can send the bank a letter explaining the situation, ask them to give the bearer thirty thousand francs and tell them to ring up my lawyers in Rabat if they're not satisfied as to the genuineness of my letter."

"Thirty thousand would be a bit of a temptation to the messenger, wouldn't it?" said Bob doubtfully.

Deschamps shook his head.

"It would if *we* sent him, but he wouldn't dare doublecross his own Kaid and Hadji. If the bank hand out the money the messenger will bring it back safe enough."

When the meal was over Deschamps, lying back on cushions, talking to the Hadji and his inner circle of Counsellors and advisers, led up to the request very tactfully. He expressed their great appreciation of Abdullah's kindness and generosity in sending their camels to recuperate, at his own expense, in the pastures: how comfortable they all were in the house allotted to them by the Hadji, whom he complimented on the quality of the carpets and furnishings with which they had been supplied. It was not, he explained, until Abdullah had referred to the poor condition and the fatigue of the camels that they realised how tired they were themselves. And the events of the past forty-eight hours had done little to

refresh them. It would be most pleasant if they could take the Hadji at his word and live in ease and peace for a few months . . . but—the Hadji would understand—they could not live like parasites on the hospitality of the wealthier inhabitants of Fachi. They were no longer in the position of strangers travelling through a strange land, entitled by custom to hospitality for one night . . . it was only right and just that they should pay. They had money in Mogador and in Rabat . . . perhaps if they were to write letters, the Hadji could despatch a messenger to Mogador to collect their money . . . ?

The Hadji agreed at once. He would order a relative of his, named El Barani, to mount his swiftest she-camel that night and ride without dismounting until he reached Mogador. Abdullah would go immediately and instruct El Barani to be ready as soon as the Great Bear was visible in the night sky. . . .

“That went off smoothly enough,” said Bob as they walked across to their own house. “I want to have a good look at this El Barani so that I’ll know him again in case he doesn’t hurry back.”

The messenger, clothed and equipped as for a long non-stop journey, arrived at their door just as the stars became visible through the early evening mists. Folds of muslin protected his face

from the biting night wind so that only his eyes were visible. He thrust the letter into the folds of his head-dress, pressed his camel's neck with his heels and loped off into the darkness.

"So much for getting a good look at him," Bob remarked. "And I wonder if we'll ever see him again."

"I don't think we need worry," Deschamps assured him. "He'll be back, probably sooner than we expect."

A few days later Vic burst into the room where Bob and Deschamps were whiling away the time with a set of makeshift chessmen. His face, beneath its tan, looked pale and startled.

"Look!" he exclaimed, and flung a piece of torn paper on Deschamps' lap.

The Frenchman unfolded it, and stifled a sudden oath.

"Where did you get this from?" he demanded, trying to keep his voice under control.

"In Ali the cloth merchant's shop in the souks, being used as a wedge to keep a lamp-glass upright!"

Bob, concentrating on his next move, looked up.

"What's all the excitement? Shut up, Vic. I nearly missed taking Henri's knight through you."

Deschamps passed the piece of paper across the board.

"Here's part of the envelope El Barani's supposed to be taking into Mogador. We've had it!"

Bob Ellis looked at it for a long time in silence.

"Dirty work at the crossroads somewhere," he remarked bitterly, at length. "Okay, you two! What's the next move?"

They went straight to the old Hadji, showed him the envelope and demanded an immediate enquiry and explanation. The old man was terse and to the point.

"Fetch Ali from his merchandise in the souk," he shouted to one of his men-at-arms.

There was an uncomfortable silence until the man returned ten minutes later, alone. Ali could not be found.

"Then go to the house of El Barani and question his family!" snapped the old man. "Ali and Abdullah shall answer many questions, even if I have to burn their finger-nails with red-hot palm splinters!"

The man-at-arms came back accompanied by a tall, fierce-looking tribesman, who saluted the Hadji with reverence and affection.

"What is your pleasure with me, O Hadji?" he demanded respectfully, and squatted on his heels.

"Listen, you cheating, lying son of a dog!"

shouted the Hadji. "Why are you not half-way to Mogador?"

El Barani frowned and stared.

"Half-way to Mogador, O Hadji?" he echoed. "Why, in the name of Allah, should I be?"

"What did you do with the letter these men gave you to take to Mogador?"

The tribesman turned and looked at them more puzzled than ever.

"Why say you such a thing to the Hadji?" he asked. "You know well you gave me no letter."

"Stop trifling!" the Hadji thundered angrily. "Did I not send Abdullah to summon thee with thy fastest camel to ride to Mogador?"

The man's frown grew even deeper.

"Whether you sent him or not, I cannot say. All I know is that he never came to me. When did you send him thus?"

"Four nights ago, as thou knowest."

"If Abdullah says he came to me four nights ago, he lies," retorted El Barani angrily, yet with a note of relief in his voice. "Four nights ago I lay with fever in the palmery at Al Bira, forty leagues away. Those that were with me will testify I speak the truth."

Deschamps glanced at Bob and Vic. They nodded, aware of what he was thinking.

"This is not the man, Hadji. He is taller than the man who took the letter."

The Hadji's face grew black with anger.

"Take thou two men with thee, El Barani, and bring that lying, disobedient reptile Abdullah to me in chains. I'll flog him with red-hot wires."

Vic's impression was that the old man meant what he said. As El Barani and the two men-at-arms departed on their errand the Hadji turned to Deschamps.

"You may leave Ali and Abdullah to me," he said, with a note in his voice that made Bob shudder. "Go to my stables and choose any three camels you wish. Ride to Mogador, and God go with you."

Within an hour they were ready to leave. As they rode to the Hadji's house to say farewell they met the old man coming down the road to meet them.

"Abdullah has vanished!" he stormed. "He and that swill-swallowing haberdasher Ali! They cannot disappear into thin air, nor have they passed through the gates. They must still be in the town, and when I find them I'll grill them both alive."

They said good-bye to the aged Hadji with something akin to regret, and in order to avoid too much notice they made their way through the

half-deserted, semi-ruined streets that led to the Eastern gate.

All of a sudden Bob gave a whoop and pointed.

"Look, there's Abdullah—up on that roof!"

Deschamps and Vic had just time to catch sight of the man who had tricked them before he jumped for cover and disappeared.

"Come on," cried Vic. "After him!"

They leaped direct from their saddles to the ground without waiting for the beasts to kneel and in a matter of seconds each had clove-hitched the single guiding-rein to his camel's foreleg, thereby making it impossible for the animals to move other than at a slow walk. Bob and Deschamps reached the outer door of the house a yard ahead of Vic. The force of their combined onslaught had the same effect as a battering-ram and the door went down with a splintering crash. The spacious courtyard was deserted, the stables, out-buildings, and inner walls broken and half ruined. It had evidently been a fine house in its day, the mansion of some wealthy brigand nobleman.

The door of the dwelling quarters hung half open on a broken rickety hinge, but the room held nothing but dust and scorpions. There was neither sign nor trace of Abdullah.

Vic went up the ladder leading to the roof. On the second rung from the top he paused.

"Footprints!" he called to Bob and Deschamps waiting below.

"Mind where you tread," called Deschamps, and they followed him up to the roof. By the time they had reached the top, Vic had followed a trail of imprints of bare feet to the far edge.

"What fools we are!" Deschamps exclaimed angrily. "One of us ought to have stayed below. He waited here, guessing we'd all charge in through the front door. Then he jumped from here to that broken wall—it's an easy jump for any trained man—and got clean away while we were chasing over the house and up the ladder."

"Maybe," retorted Vic, and jumped. He landed lightly on the broken wall.

"He's still here," he called. "I can see the mark where he jumped and a track leading to that outhouse. There's no door on the far side, so he's still there. Come on!"

He vaulted to the ground to make room for them, and waited. As they moved forward Bob drew his Luger and pushed back the safety-catch. Old bales of merchandise, loot from forgotten caravans, lay about, half-filling the shed. In the centre of the floor was a trap-door. Bob jerked up the flap and they peered down into a large, freshly swept room. Several rugs lay on the floor,

on which were also two or three flickering crude-oil lamps.

"Got him, I bet!" whooped Vic, and jumped down. Bob and Deschamps followed immediately behind him.

They heard a mocking laugh and the trap-door slammed above their heads. They heard a heavy bale thud on the flap.

At that precise moment, although they were unaware of the fact, Ali the cloth merchant drove the camels they had been riding into the courtyard above and hobbled them. Then, taking cover behind a crumbling wall, he squatted down, on guard with a modern magazine rifle across his knees.

In the cellar below, a loophole opened in an obscure doorway in a corner and Bob found himself covered by an old-fashioned musket.

"Drop your pistol, magician," ordered a voice on the far side of the door.

Bob's finger coiled round the trigger.

"Don't play the fool!" Deschamps urged him, and struck his weapon downwards. "He could blow us all to bits from there."

The Luger fell to the floor with a clatter, and Abdullah came in with a triumphant, mocking sneer across his debauched and cruel face. He was followed closely by a gorgeously dressed Arab

whose face was covered by the dark blue veil of the Tuaregs. The man stepped forward, picked up the pistol and thrust it beneath his robes. Then his long, powerful fingers gripped their arms in turn. Bob made as though to resist but on a sharp threat from the man with the musket and a word of advice from Deschamps he submitted.

"Fifteen thousand the three," said the Arab. "They're strong, but they're white. They won't last above a year in the salt-mines—even my blacks from the Senegal and the South die after a couple of years. That's my top price—take it or leave it."

Even Deschamps blanched at the mention of the salt-mines—the hell-on-earth controlled by the Tuaregs to the north and east of Timbuktu. Abdullah haggled, but the Tuareg was adamant. Five thousand francs, cash down, for each. Finally Abdullah agreed with an ill grace.

"Fifteen thousand isn't much," he grumbled. "Ali will take five thousand and it will cost me another five to buy my way back into the Hadji's favour."

The Tuareg was indifferent.

"That's your affair," he retorted. "My worry is to get fifteen thousand douro worth of white slave from here to the mines without killing them

and without getting caught by the Desert Police patrols. I'll move as soon as it's dark."

Abdullah, Ali, and the man with the musket roped their arms and legs so that they were helpless. The Tuareg looked on contemptuously.

It seemed an age before they were gagged, carried up into the courtyard and bound to their camels. The Tuareg slave-buyer, Deschamps gathered from the conversation, had come alone to avoid being too conspicuous. His men were some forty miles away with the camels and a few slaves he had bought south-east of Taroudant.

All night they rode in great discomfort and with the utmost caution. Periodically the Tuareg halted to ensure that there were neither signs nor sounds of pursuit. The journey was made in silence; not once did the man speak, and he made no attempt to remove the gags during the night.

At length, when the dawn was not far off, the three prisoners could see the glow of a tiny camp-fire in a hollow of some dunes, and heard the sleepy grunt of tired camels at rest. There was a low challenge in the darkness, reinforced by the click of a rifle-bolt. The Tuareg halted, answered, and then led them on.

A second Tuareg came forward, slinging his rifle across his shoulders. Swiftly their arms and legs were unbound and the gags removed. The

slaver who had bought them tore the veil from his face and sank on his knees.

“Oh, my masters, my masters,” Hameda cried joyously. “How happy I am my brother and I were in time! It was the only way we could get you safely from Fachi. I have your clothes, your money, and your pistols, but Atua, the thieving dog, has everything else.”

CHAPTER VII

SIROCCO

BOB, Victor, and Deschamps lay sprawling on rugs round the camp-fire. Hameda, proud and happy at the part he had played in their rescue from Fachi, was making coffee, boiling eggs and grilling long palm-skewers of *kibab* over the glowing embers. Fuhazi, his brother, sat keeping watch, silent and motionless, hidden in a fold on the crest of a sand dune.

Hameda dished up the food, poured out the coffee, and squatted back on his heels to continue his story.

"And then, O masters," he went on, glancing from one to the other, "as I watched you carried away, black anger filled my heart. I could have killed Atua with your pistol but had I done so, the Sheikh's party would have come back. . . . Even with the pistols what could I have done against so many?"

"I don't blame you," said Bob. "Twenty-five to one is pretty heavy odds against success."

"*Ey-ewa!*" agreed Hameda respectfully. "I felt that alive I might yet help even if I were a

hundred miles away; dead, I should be no use at all, even on your threshold."

"How true!" Deschamps nodded seriously, careful to let no hint of a smile show his amusement at the way Hamedra expressed himself.

"We rode all day, not halting until evening. Atua called us together when the camels were tethered and said that when we had eaten, he would apportion the loot. After that we were to split up, each man going in a different direction so as to avoid risk of capture by the police patrols. . . . I knew that if I was to act I must act at once. Yet what could I do—one against so many? It was sunset and I went apart from the others into some low sand dunes to pray. Even as I turned my face to Mecca, invoked the Name of Allah and opened my eyes, so were the prayers of my heart answered. There, before me in the dunes, were a dozen desert poppies, of which, if a man eats a leaf, he will sleep from sunset to sunset. I gathered them and boiled them in water with which we made our tea, for the poppy leaves are tasteless. . . . Of the tea I drank not myself, and within an hour Atua and the others were asleep.

"First I loaded my camel with all the water I should need. For the others, I set aside enough, but no more, to last them as far as the nearest

water-hole. That which remained I tipped into the sand and slit the water-skins with my dagger. Then I loaded your clothes, your guns, and your most useful possessions on to the best spare camel, and drove all the other camels before me for five miles to delay Atua when he awoke and gave chase. Then I set off for my village, riding fast all night and next day, to find my brother. . . . The rest, my masters, you know. It was not much, but the best I could do alone."

The faithful lad seemed almost apprehensive of rebuke in case his hearers thought he had been slow and had done insufficient.

Bob looked enquiringly at Deschamps.

"Words seem pretty inadequate, Henri. We might have got away from Fachi without him, but I wouldn't care to bet on it. Let's give him one of these daggers."

"Good idea," agreed Deschamps.

Hameda's joy as he thrust the silver sheath in his waist-band was unbounded.

After a brief rest to enable them to recover from the fatigue and discomfort of the night they set off south-east, intending to turn west, twenty-four hours later, for Smara.

Towards noon the heat became terrific and the sky like molten brass. Away to the south the horizon became tinged with queer, coppery-

looking clouds. Fuhazi, who was riding in front, gave vent to a sudden, vicious-sounding expletive, wheeled his camel and pointed. Deschamps, who had dozed off under the heat and the gentle swaying of his mount, looked up quickly and let out a low whistle.

"Now we're for it!" he muttered to the others. Rapidly he unwound the muslin head-cloth from his forehead and wrapped it round his mouth and nostrils. The others did the same.

"Sand!" he shouted through the muffling folds. "A nasty storm, too, from the look of it. Follow the Arabs' lead and do what they do."

Fuhazi urged his mehari to a gallop and headed for some dunes that lay, scarcely more than a smudge, on the skyline to their left. Bob, Deschamps, and Vic followed him while Hamed, with the two baggage camels, brought up the rear.

The atmosphere became heavy and the heat almost insupportable; lean as they were, sweated down by desert travel to whipcord and sinew, without an ounce of superfluous flesh, the two boys could feel the perspiration pouring down their bodies. The sunlight took on an eerie violet colour and a heavy awe-inspiring silence seemed to descend over the desert.

"Faster! Faster!" urged Hamed, and his long snake-like camel-whip flicked the hind-

quarters of the riding camels ahead of him, urging them onward. Deschamps with the ease of long experience rode in comfort, but Bob and Vic found themselves obliged to keep their balance by gripping the centre crosspiece of the saddle. The camels, perfectly trained meharis of excellent stock, raced on at the speed of an automobile. The sand dunes for which they were making were becoming more clearly visible every moment. Fuhazi changed direction slightly and headed for a narrow pass through the centre of the range. Checking speed swiftly, he led them to the far side of the first big dune, forced his camel to kneel and hog-tied it. In a matter of seconds all six camels were hobbled, their tails turned to the wind.

"Lie at the camel's shoulder and be ready to bury your face in the fur on his neck when the storm breaks," Hameda explained quickly.

They were in position none too soon. With a roaring, whistling screech the wind—the dreaded sirocco from the furnace-like southern plains—struck the far side of the dunes behind them, ripping great clouds of sand from the crest of the ridge and enveloping the travellers crouched in the hollow ahead in a dense mist of salty, choking dust. Even the protection afforded by their head-dresses and the camels' fur failed to prevent it

from forcing its way, acrid and gritty, into their mouths and between their teeth, blocking ears and nostrils to the point of suffocation, and producing a raging, unquenchable thirst.

For an hour they lay, while the sirocco shrieked and raged above them, and sand beat its way through their clothes, cutting them as though with a myriad of tiny whips. Then, without warning, the storm passed on even more abruptly than it had broken, and the travellers stood up.

Hameda carefully measured out about a table-spoonful of water each.

"What on earth's the use of that?" muttered Vic. "I want a gallon."

Deschamps shook his head. He tried to speak, but his throat was so dry and hot and rasping that he could emit only an inarticulate croak.

"To swallow water would kill you now," Fuhazi gasped. "Hold this in your mouth as long as you can, rinse your teeth and then spit it out. But don't swallow."

An hour later he brewed a potful of their precious supply of tea, which they sipped, scalding hot and very sweet—the only safe thirst-quenching stimulant for those who have been subjected to the exhaustion and heat of a Sahara sandstorm.

Hameda clambered, with the loose, soft, un-

settled sand almost to his knees at every step, to the crest of the ridge behind them. For a moment or two he stood there, gazing around. Then he called urgently to his brother and Deschamps. When they reached his side he pointed?

"See! Every track is obliterated—every landmark gone." He cast a worried look towards the south and indicated the direction with a jerk of his chin. "The southern end of the dunes has vanished—blown away like powder.* We must be careful. One mistake of a mile and our bones will whiten and bake in the Tanezrouft." †

Fuhazi nodded agreement.

"Let us go on through the dunes and then travel down the far side. The farthest ridge will be the least damaged by the storm. We'll get our bearings from there more accurately than from here."

They set off, following a kind of natural road from which the dunes rose sheer on either side. Suddenly the sound of a shot echoed dully through the pass and a heavy slug whistled unpleasantly close to Vic's ear, kicking up a spurt of dust behind him. It was a perfectly chosen spot for

* This is the greatest bugbear and danger in desert travel. In a severe storm a whole range of dunes that has lain (say) E. to W. for as long as records can show, can be picked up by the wind and deposited N. to S. ten miles away.

† The ghastly waterless region. The name is Tuareg—Country of Fear.

an ambush. Penned in by steep, unbroken walls of sand, escape was impossible; and the speed at which they travelled made the tiny caravan an easy mark.

"Trot!" shouted Hamed, who was leading.

"They'll pick us off like sitting cats if we don't," snapped Deschamps, and urged the camels into a quick shuffling amble.

Another shot echoed and whistled through the dunes, and they caught sight of the figure of a man kneeling half hidden at the summit of the forward slope some hundred yards to their right.

Fuhazi, without checking his camel, raised Deschamps' repeating rifle to his shoulder and pressed the trigger. A second later the kneeling man lurched forward and then somersaulted down the face of the cliff. For an instant, three figures were silhouetted against the skyline, and then vanished. With their fingers on the trigger and every sense on the alert the five men rode forward.

Fuhazi halted as he came to where the bandit's body lay sprawling, face upwards, in the sand.

"The Mohurren!" he grunted.

"That's torn it!" said Deschamps with a glance at the corpse.

Bob caught Hamed's eye and received a shock. Gone completely was the quiet, capable, Moorish

servant. In a flash he had been transformed into a fierce, implacable warrior tribesman, whose close-shut lips and savage air showed that he would neither give nor expect quarter.

No other incident occurred as they hurried through the dunes and there was no sign of any enemy as they emerged on to the plain on the far side.

"Keep going," advised both Hamed and Fuhazi. They rode on all through the night, chewing only occasional handfuls of dates for food. They rode swiftly and in silence, hoping in that way to avoid the menace of the dreaded Mohurren.

With the light of dawn their hopes of throwing off the Tuaregs were dashed. A mile and a half away, on either side of them, skirmishing parties were strung out in single file. The early morning sun glinted on the steel points of their twelve-foot lances and on the long broad blades of their Crusader-like swords. The two lines began to converge on the isolated little party in the centre. A few gas-pipe slugs whistled overhead.

"Down, and we'll make a fight for it!" snapped Deschamps. "Bury the water-skins in case of a rip!"

The camels were put down in a circle, the five men making use of such cover as the beasts pro-

vided. Deschamps and Fuhazi opened fire with repeating rifles and within a minute half a dozen camel-saddles had been emptied. On the other side, Bob with his Luger, Vic with a rifle, and Hamedia with Deschamps' pistol were disorganising the Tuaregs' attack. The raiders wheeled, galloped out of range and then circled to join up with the attackers on the far side. Vic reloaded his rifle, crawled across and lay down beside Deschamps. Altogether only nine Mohurren remained in the saddle. They withdrew about half a mile and appeared to hold a conference.

"Driven 'em off, do you think?" asked Bob anxiously, wiping the sweat and sand from his face with the back of his hand.

Deschamps shook his head slowly.

"I doubt it, but we've taught them a pretty wholesome respect for repeating weapons."

Fuhazi seemed to grasp the question and the Frenchman's answer.

"Our one hope is to move off now and ride as fast and as far as we can," he said, leaping to his feet and untying the camels. "They will not attack again, but they've sent a man back to the main body for reinforcements. Look, there he goes."

The surviving Mohurren ignored their departure and made no attempt to interfere. As they

moved off Hameda compressed his lips and regarded the camels thoughtfully.

"They're tired, too tired by far, and they need water," he said anxiously. "The Mohurren will have come up with us again by nightfall—probably scores of them. Our one hope is to find a patch of rocks over which their camels cannot charge, where we can make a fort and hold them off for as long as our water and ammunition last out."

Towards noon, Fuhazi, who was acting as scout on the southern flank, gave a hail and signalled the others to change direction and join him. When they came up with him, he pointed to a patch of thorn bush surrounded by stones and rocks.

"We could travel many miles and for many hours before finding a better place to defend ourselves against the Mohurren," he announced. "What say you, my masters? Shall we stay here and fight it out, or go on in hope?"

Deschamps and Hameda regarded the place critically.

"What do you think, Bob?" the Frenchman demanded, including Vic in the question.

"Stay and, if necessary, fight," Bob replied.

"I vote for staying," said Vic. "If nothing happens by morning we can push on. But the

camels need rest. So do we, if it comes to that. We've a better chance against the Mohurren here than we would in the open desert. And a day's rest will let us make better speed to-morrow."

Deschamps agreed with them both.

The camels were made to lie down and hobbled in the shade of the thorns, and then the five men set to work to build a rough, low wall of stones and rocks. Hamedra and Bob mounted guard while the others endeavoured, in spite of the heat, to sleep. Half-way through the afternoon Vic and Deschamps took over guard and Fuhazi boiled a little of their precious water to make tea.

"If we're going to have a proper meal we'd better cook it now," said Vic. "We don't want a fire once it's dark."

Bob opened the saddle-bag with the provisions and selected a tin of meat and some mixed vegetables. As an afterthought he added a tin of peaches.

"The four greatest soldiers that the world has ever known," he remarked impressively. "... I refer, of course, to Julius Cæsar when he was not in winter quarters, Napoleon, Baden-Powell, and a certain ex-corporal of the Sedstone J.T.C. named Robert le Fleming Ellis—have always maintained that troops should have a hot meal

before an impending engagement *ad barbaros*, 'against the barbarians.'"

Eating brought appetite in spite of the heat, and an hour later when plates had been scoured with sand and the fire extinguished, they sat in a watchful wide-awake circle, scanning the horizon for any sign of the Mohurren.

"Not a sign," Bob confirmed. "Do you think it's a case of 'once bit twice shy' after this morning's dust-up? We gave them a pretty good taste of what our weapons can do."

The question was put to Hamedra, who shook his head doubtfully.

"If Allah wills and He were very favourably inclined towards us, it could be so," he told them. "The Mohurren are not usually disposed of so readily. They have not returned to the attack, so we may hope. Morning will show."

As the sun vanished in the west in a blaze of gold and crimson splendour, Henri Deschamps called them together.

"From now until dawn," he ordered, "there must be no talking, no sound: nothing that could possibly indicate the position of our camp. Although we haven't seen a vestige of the Mohurren all day, it doesn't mean that we may not be completely surrounded or that they don't know exactly where we are. As likely as not they'll

creep up under cover of darkness and rush us with daggers. We shan't know a thing about it until they've arrived."

And the Mohurren arrived in complete silence in the total darkness at two o'clock in the morning. A camel grunted, a dagger rang and grated against a stone, and a dozen silent, blood-lusting Mohurren hurled themselves on to the five defenders. Bob and Hamed, were able to use their pistols for a moment and a few grunts showed that some of their bullets, at any rate, had found a mark. In the darkness Vic, Deschamps, and Fuhazi could only club their rifles and lash out blindly with the butts.

From the camels came angry, protesting grunts. The fight was over as silently and as suddenly as it had begun. The Mohurren melted away into the darkness as abruptly as they had materialised out of it. A moment or two later the Tuaregs could be heard chanting a psalm of victory, their voices growing fainter and fainter.

Deschamps endeavoured to recover the breath which a terrific blow in the pit of the stomach had driven from his body. He felt sick with pain.

"Vic—Bob!" he called. "Are you all right? Where are you?"

"I'm here!" called Vic's voice from the centre

of the stone ring. "Winded—and a crack on the head. Where's Bob?"

"Hameda—Fuhazi—*min enta?*"

"*Houn, sidi*—Fuhazi."

The three—Deschamps, Vic, and Fuhazi—came together in the darkness and called.

"Bob!—Hameda! Where are you?"

"Come on!" said Deschamps grimly. "Find a lantern, Fuhazi. We'll have to risk a light. . . ."

A few seconds later, as the wick spluttered into flame, Vic saw that not only his brother, but Hameda and the camels were missing. He felt as if a cold hand had gripped his heart.

CHAPTER VIII

THIRST

IN after days Vic always described the period during which they waited for daylight as crawling by like some interminable nightmare. It was impossible to make a thorough search in the darkness, and the feeble light of the hurricane lamp cast such queer and misleading shadows that it was more hindrance than help. As the first crimson tip of the sun appeared above the horizon, Vic and Deschamps knew that their worst fears had been confirmed. Bob was missing—carried off alive, possibly injured, by the Mohurren. Although he did not say so to Vic, Deschamps would have been happier to know that Bob was dead. Death was preferable to capture by those fiends.

Fuhazi, too, felt those same icy fingers of dread. When he realised that Hameda, his brother, was also missing, he stood for some moments like a handsome bronze statue, gripping his rifle fiercely and staring towards the dunes with smouldering eyes and close, tight-shut lips. His expression boded ill for any Mohurren

tribesman who might wander within range of his rifle.

For some time anxiety and shock over the fate of Bob and Hamedra rendered them oblivious to everything else; but at last they realised their own predicament. The camels had gone; in the blindness of the battle in the dark the water-skins had been damaged and they had barely a quart of water between them; whatever they needed would have to be carried and the next water lay across many, many miles of barren sun-roasted desert. Vic and Deschamps both knew that if they reached it on foot, it would be a miracle and only by the grace and mercy of God.

Their baggage had been left unmolested, and they sat down to sort out and divide the essential minimum to be taken with them. All the rest would have to be abandoned.

At length Vic spoke.

"What's it to be?" he asked. "Smara and Ronnie, or chasing the Mohurren in the hope of making a rescue?"

"Which do you think, Fuhazi?" asked Deschamps, translating Vic's words.

"The Mohurren," replied the Arab without hesitation. "If we can reach the dunes by night-fall we have a chance—a very small chance—of

surviving. If we strike out into the open desert we have none."

"Why so?" asked Vic.

"In the dunes there will be dew at night on the north side, maybe even frost. We can at any rate rest there in comfort at night. In the open plain we can only get hotter and hotter until we shrivel and die. Besides, there is grazing in the dunes and the Mohurren may camp there for some days."

Deschamps nodded agreement.

"They'll never imagine we'd follow. They may well make camp there. . . . It's a chance, anyway."

They set out across the desert where the sand was already uncomfortably hot to tread barefoot. They marched steadily and in silence, for speech tended to produce dryness of the tongue. Every three hours they halted and Deschamps measured out one dessertspoonful of water each, which they held in their mouths for five minutes, then swallowed slowly, endeavouring to ensure that the minute quantity moistened every part of their throats as it went down. By mid-afternoon their lips were cracked and swollen in spite of the protection afforded by the muslin headdress. In that terrific temperature the exertion of trudging over the sand produced a perspiration that evaporated

as soon as it formed, leaving a fine gritty salt on their skin. The agony in their feet from the scorching, sun-saturated desert was intense. Vic, being the youngest and the least accustomed physically to the effect of tropical heat, suffered the most. Fuhazi, being a Moor from the Southern Souss, suffered least. In spite of his slight figure, he strode steadily forward apparently impervious to heat and thirst alike, seldom speaking, his dark, unfathomable eyes fixed vengefully on the skyline.

Vic, hardly recovered from the shock of realising that both his brothers were now slaves—if nothing worse—in some Saharan stronghold, was less able to appreciate the innumerable small offices by which Fuhazi tried to ease their appalling hardships. He carried double the load of either of the two white men and his ready, encouraging smile at each halt did more to help them than Vic ever knew. He showed Vic how to walk by placing the sole of his foot flat on the sand at each step—the characteristic and tireless gait of the desert traveller—and how to swing his arms across and away from his body so as to create and make the most of any movement of air against the skin. When he did speak it was always to utter some remark that held an assumption of success.

Deschamps, experienced in desert travel as he was, was fully conscious of the fact that if it had not been for Fuhazi they would not, in all probability, have reached the dunes by sundown. Exhausted and half delirious with heat and thirst as they were, Fuhazi firmly and relentlessly drove them to climb to the summit of the highest dune in the first ridge. The sun had scarcely vanished behind the western skyline before the temperature dropped appreciably. They swallowed a spoonful of tepid water and managed to eat a few dates. An hour after sunset Fuhazi spread the cloaks he had insisted on carrying on the ground, in a hollow on the north side of the dunes.

Vic, his throat and tongue like emery paper, watched him.

"What's the point of that?" he croaked.

Fuhazi regarded the indigo-tinted heavens.

"There will be dew to-night," he replied. "If Allah wills and is gracious enough to saturate the cloaks, even that much moisture can keep us on this side of death."

They slept fitfully, their muscles aching as though with fever, and awoke, half frozen, before dawn. Like animals they went down on all fours and sucked the cool, musty moisture from the wool and cotton cloaks.

For two days they wandered through the dunes,

nearly blinded by the dazzling glare and rarely more than half conscious from heat and raging, intolerable thirst. The Mohurren had vanished. True, Fuhazi and Deschamps found their trail, but it was clear that the raiding party were moving at speed and were probably encamped miles away, maybe even heading for the heli-on-earth salt-mines of Taudeni, to the north of Timbuktu.

On the third night Fuhazi counted out the eighteen remaining dates—six each. His grim, inscrutable face looked enquiringly at Deschamps.

The Frenchman spoke quietly.

"This appears to be where we come to the end, Vic. We have six dates and about a spoonful and a half of stale water. So let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die." He glanced at the boy with a brave, quizzical smile. "I'm sorry, Vic," he went on, gripping his shoulder. "It's better to face facts. Six dates and a mouthful of musty water. It's no use making two bites at a cherry. We can't split it over two days. . . ."

For some long time Vic sat silent, staring upwards at the sky in which the stars glowed and twinkled like illuminated diamonds. Suddenly he spoke.

"David must have been in a jam like this before he wrote that psalm—'Out of the deep have I

called unto Thee, O Lord.' I wish I could remember it all. We used to have it every Friday night at school. . . ."

Although he had spoken to Deschamps in English, Fuhazi guessed the trend of his words.

"If Allah wills," said the Arab quietly, "all things are possible."

They lay down to sleep. The Plough was low in the heavens when Fuhazi awoke them, shaking them urgently by the shoulders.

"Ssh! Ssh! Listen!" he whispered.

Faintly, very faintly, across the still night air came the distant *ting-ting* of a camel-bell.

Deschamps picked up his rifle and unwound the cloth he had bound round the breech as a protection against sand and dust.

"El Mohurren?" he whispered back.

Fuhazi shook his head in the darkness.

"No. Robbér's like the Mohurren move in silence. They have no bells on their animals."

For half an hour they sat in silence, their ears cocked and every sense on the alert. From time to time they caught the musical note of the bell. At length Fuhazi rose to his feet with a grunt of satisfaction and relief.

"Whoever they are, they come this way," he asserted. "By the time the sun has risen we shall see them."

Even as he spoke the chill steel blue of the sky behind became suffused with rose and purple, and the light came suddenly as the sun shot above the horizon.

Hope lent them unexpected strength. They scrambled down the face of the dune and stumbled blindly from one ridge to another until they reached a point from which they could see the desert spread out before them.

Coming towards them, but yet several miles away, was a caravan of some fifty white-robed Arabs and about a hundred camels. As he beheld the white clothes of the riders Fuhazi gave a cracked shout of joy. Whoever they might prove to be, they were not Tuaregs.

Vic screwed up his eyes, strained and blood-shot by the glare of the sand, and gazed at the distant caravan.

"We'll never catch them up," he croaked. "They're heading to strike the dunes some miles north of us. Had we better fire a shot to attract their attention?"

In spite of his burning, thirst-constricted throat Deschamps laughed.

"Better not, Vic. We might either scare them off altogether or else attract their attention in a way we don't want." For a second or two he

stood in thought and then took a small tin box from the few first-aid essentials with which he had burdened himself. Removing the lid, he burnished the inside with sand. "Got it!" he exclaimed, and began to flash it to and fro in the early morning sunlight.

Fuhazi strained his eyes to watch the effect. After a couple of moments he grunted with satisfaction.

"They have seen it, my masters. The caravan has halted. Five men ride this way. Let us sling our rifles across our backs so that they can see we mean no mischief, and go towards them."

Half blind and barely conscious of anything but the agonising pains of prolonged thirst, they staggered down the face of the dunes and out across the furnace-like desert. Courage and a fierce granite-like determination kept them going through what seemed to be eternity. At length, almost at the end of his tether, Vic heard a hail.

"Stay where you are! Who are you? Halt, and tell us!"

Before he had time to hear Deschamps and Fuhazi croak out an answer, his knees had given way. When he recovered consciousness, he found himself on the back of a camel, naked and

wrapped in a moist blanket.* Fuhazi rode on one side of him and Deschamps on the other. The first thing he noticed was that they were unbound and still carried their rifles. Evidently they were among friends. Consciousness returned rapidly and he realised that he was being carried, like a baby, in the arms of a gigantic, white-robed negro.

Deschamps edged his camel nearer.

"How are you feeling, Vic?" His level grey eyes were anxious.

Vic tried to smile but the movement of his facial muscles sent agonising pains, like showers of red-hot sparks, through his lips and cheeks.

"So-so. I'm all right again now. Did I conk out?"

"You did," said Deschamps with a whimsical smile. "Right out. In fact, you've been out for about three hours. Luckily these nomads had plenty of water. Take it easy, and don't talk. From what I can make out, we'll be camping in about half an hour in some mimosa thorn over there."

The negro giant in whose arms Vic was cradled

* To give a drink to a man who has collapsed after a prolonged period of thirst is fatal. Instead, he is wrapped in moist sheets to absorb water through the pores of his skin. After recovering consciousness he should be fed with hot sweet tea, a teaspoonful at a time.

rode on without turning his head or in any way showing the slightest interest either in Vic's recovery or in their conversation. He was blind, deaf, and dumb: a slave on whom the Hand of Allah had rested with such effect that he was regarded as a kind of holy mascot by his masters. His physical strength was colossal.

Vic dozed in spite of his uncomfortable position until he was awakened by the movements and noise of the camels kneeling down and the riders dismounting.

A gaunt, hawk-like man who appeared to be the leader of the caravan motioned them to go and lie in the shade of the bushes. The negro, with some queer instinct, followed them unhesitatingly. In a few minutes a man brought them tea, bread, a small quantity of boiled wheat, and some broth.

"To-night," he said, "you shall eat with us. For the present, share this, sleep and regain your strength. It is not many who stand at the edge of the shadow of death in the Tanezrouft and are permitted to turn back and walk away again. Sleep, and give thanks to Allah the Merciful and Mohammed His Prophet."

"Who are these people?" Vic asked as the man withdrew.

"I can't quite make out," replied Deschamps.

"They seem to be a powerful tribe of nomads from the South and they're pretty well armed to the teeth. That much is obvious. Whether they're going up North to trade or whether they're out on a raid I haven't discovered yet."

They slept until evening, when they were awakened by the man who had brought them the tea; he informed them that Seyid Bakr, the leader, wished to question them. They found him squatting beneath the shade of a black goat-hair canopy spread from bush to bush. He greeted them civilly enough.

"Tell me, strangers, how came you to wander on foot in the Country of Fear and Thirst? Who are you and whence do you come?"

Deschamps acted as spokesman. He evaded the real point of their journey—that they were going to Smara to look for Ronnie—by saying that they had come to seek a strange, invincible white man, whom they knew, by the powers of the Pointer-to-Truth (he showed him the compass) and by the signs of the Pictures-that-Speak-in-Silence (he produced the pack of cards), to be alive and in the desert. He spoke of their betrayal to the Blue Moors and their rescue by Hamed and Fuhazi, and of the attack and the capture of Bob and Hamed by the Mohurren. At the

mention of the Mohurren, the gaunt nomad's attitude changed.

"If the boy's brother and your slave's brother are their prisoners, then you must be at enmity with them!" he exclaimed. "That is good. Truly are the ways of Allah wonderful and beyond our understanding! Are not your rifles better than ours and are we not on our way to obliterate these same Mohurren robbers who have molested you? *Wallahi*, what a battle it will be! Rest, eat, and recover your strength, for in four days we will attack them!"

CHAPTER IX

THE MOHURREN LAIR

THE first rose-tinted streaks of dawn were turning to gold when the Mohurren raiders halted in the dunes for a brief rest and to deal with the wounds inflicted on them during the brief, fierce fight. The camel-hair cords that bit savagely into the arms and ankles of Bob and Hamedra were loosened as their captors gave them a few mouthfuls of water.

For two days they were taken, bound hand and foot, across the relentless desert by the tall, blue-robed giants who seemed unaffected by heat, thirst, hunger, or exhaustion. Mile after mile and hour after hour the raiders, on their great milk-white camels, streamed on across the furnace-like plain until sand began to give place to stones, and dunes and sand-banks to rock ledges and boulders. Darkness had fallen for several hours on the second night when Bob realised that the camels' pace had slackened to a walk and that the animals and their Tuareg masters were picking their way carefully over rough stony ground.

A low challenge was audible in the pitch darkness ahead, and from the echo of answering voices Bob guessed that they were surrounded by high rocky cliffs. The caravan halted momentarily and then moved forward again. In what was evidently a hollow in the midst of precipitous sandstone cliffs, the tops of which were silhouetted faintly against the starlit skies, was a ring of campfires from which arose a sudden fierce babble of guttural voices.

Bob and Hamedra were cut free as they found themselves surrounded by cruel-looking, hawk-faced men who argued and wrangled whether or not they should be put to death at once. All discussion ceased at a sudden command rapped out by the leader of the raiding party. The two captives were half-pushed, half-carried into a cave, flung down and left with a sentry outside. They began to chafe each other's arms and legs to restore feeling and circulation.

The Mohurren camp settled down again to sleep.

Bob regarded the sentry through the mouth of the cave.

"Could we knock him out and seize his rifle?" he whispered to Hamedra.

Hamedra shook his head in the darkness.

"There is no need to whisper, master. These

Mohurren speak a language of their own. Not one in five hundred can understand Arabic."

"That's something to be thankful for, then," said Bob. "Could we hit him over the head and then sneak out before it's light?" "

"No!" Hameda was emphatic. "Far better to trust in Allah that we shall be alive to-morrow night. We are tired, we are weak from hunger and thirst and our muscles are still half useless from being tied so long. Let us rest and recover our strength. Then to-morrow, when it is light, let us use our eyes, our ears, and our wits, so that we can make a plan. With these people we will make only one mistake."

Bob could see that Hameda's advice was sound. To trust to blind chance would be hopeless, courting disaster. He knew, too, that Hameda was right. If they made one mistake in their plan for getting away they would not have the opportunity to make another.

When morning came they were brought hot food and scalding tea. The man who waited on them grunted some remark in his own guttural tongue, but neither Bob nor Hameda understood its meaning. He returned a few minutes later with a younger, paler-skinned man carrying a *gherba* of water and a basket of dates which he deposited in a corner.

"Mukazzim, our Chief," said the younger man in Arabic, "tells me to explain that you are his prisoners and his slaves. If you behave, you will be given food and water and when we return to our pastures you will be sent to the salt-mines of Timoudi. If you do not behave and so incur the wrath and displeasure of Mukazzim, you will be flogged with camel-whips, driven a hundred miles into the Tanezrouft and left there to die of thirst."

Bob decided, then and there, to take a leaf out of Deschamps' book and to copy the tactics he had employed so successfully when they had arrived, in somewhat similar circumstances, at Fachi.

He feigned violent anger—even Hamedā was startled and nonplussed for the moment.

"Go back, thou dog, to this Mukazzim of whom you speak," he roared. "Demand of him what words are those to send by some snivelling slave to a Seer, a Foreteller of the Future, a Holy Man and Magician? Begone!" He remembered Deschamps' trump card with Sheikh Bohari. "Tell him that vulture whispereth to vulture in the desert and that before the next moon waneth his bones, not mine, shall be picked clean."

"*Wallahi!*" exclaimed Hamedā, who had been told what had happened at Fachi and who

guessed what Bob was now attempting. "He is a magician indeed. Even his wrath can fling a man twenty paces."

The Tuareg looked scornful and spoke to his interpreter.

"In that case you were surprisingly easy to capture and singularly docile as prisoners," the man translated, sneeringly.

Bob regarded him with contempt.

"You are but the dogs that do your master's bidding," he retorted. "And as dogs I regard you. But your lord and master I will treat otherwise."

The men gave grunts of amused scepticism, and turned away.

"Do you doubt my powers?" Bob demanded icily.

The Tuareg turned round.

"Seeing is believing," said the interpreter.

Bob felt unobtrusively in his pocket for a French franc, a piece of string, a spent cartridge case, a bone button and a folding nail-file that he knew were there. He pointed to the tray of dates.

"Give me the stones of five dates," he ordered. Such was his manner and air of command that the younger man obeyed. Bob took them.

"Look well," he commanded. "Five ordinary

date stones." The Tuaregs and Hamedra drew near.

"Catch them as I let them drop, one by one."

The first Tuareg extended an enormous hand.

"See," reiterated Bob. "Five date stones from that dish. Five stones from five dates you yourself brought here."

He closed his fingers round them and then let drop—one by one—a French franc, a piece of string, a button, a spent cartridge case and a folding nail-file.

"Five date stones," he repeated, and turned away to palm them into his pocket.

The two Tuaregs stared open-mouthed at the miscellaneous collection of items Bob had substituted. If the things had been red-hot they could not have dropped them quicker. This was magic indeed!

They beat a hasty retreat. Hamedra's mocking laugh followed them.

"So far so good," said Bob seriously. "But I expect old Muck-What'shisname'll be here in a minute. I'll have to concoct something impressive for him. Oh, for the compass or the cards!"

Hamedra was quick to rise to the occasion. Feverishly they sorted through the contents of pockets and pouches for the few belongings they had carried at the time of their capture. It was

a weird collection of odds and ends, useless for any bogus display of magic. Hameda, rather surprisingly, produced a stick of shaving soap that Bob recognised as Deschamps' and a small but powerful magnifying glass that belonged to Vic. A sudden idea flashed into Bob's mind. Quickly he went over the items piled in the sand in front of them.

"What is it you seek?" Hameda demanded.

"Something—anything—to make a pipe with," retorted Bob.

Hameda put out his tongue, as Arabs do when deep in thought. Then he indicated Bob's propelling pencil. Bob got the idea.

"That might do for a stem," he said doubtfully. "Now what about a bowl?"

They sorted through their bits and pieces again, but there was nothing that even remotely resembled a pipe-bowl.

"No go, I'm afraid," said Bob, and then again Hameda pointed—this time to the empty cartridge case.

"How do you mean?" Bob asked, puzzled.

Without replying, Hameda opened the nail-file, found that the blade was narrow enough to fit into the brass cylinder, sighed with relief and punched the spent cap from the base of the cartridge. Then with a quick jerk he pulled the

outer tube from the pencil and thrust the nozzle into the aperture where the cap had been, rammed it home tight and then bent the tube gently upwards.

Bob looked sorrowfully at his pencil: It had been a nice one, a present from a patrol of scouts to whom he had given instruction in first aid.

"Alas, poor Yorick!" he murmured.

He put the pipe, the shaving soap, and the magnifying glass into a handy pocket. The other items he scattered about his person or gave to Hameda. It was a certainty that the Tuaregs would return either with the Chief himself or to take them to him.

"It is a pity," said Hameda, "that we have not the cards with which my lord divined in Fachi."

Something about Hameda's words, as Bob translated them mentally into English, struck a chord in his memory. . . . They had a strangely familiar sound. He puzzled over them for a minute: "The cards with which my lord divined in Fachi." Suddenly he gave a whoop of joy. Got it! "*The cup with which my lord . . . divineth.*" That was it . . . the Bible. . . . Joseph pulling the legs of his brethren!

He poured off what was left of the liquid in the tea-pot and tipped a few of the leaves into the bottom of his glass. Hameda, peering out of the

mouth of the cave, told him that Mukazzim and half a dozen Tuaregs were approaching. Bob swilled the leaves round in his glass until they formed a pattern, then he traced various cabalistic signs in the sand with his finger and was scrutinising the tea-leaves through the magnifying glass as the Tuareg Chief entered.

Bob ignored him completely.

The Chief's face became even darker with anger.

"Rise, dog, when I enter!"

"Silence!" retorted Bob.

He glanced at the man who had interpreted before.

"Tell this man that if he interrupts until I am ready to speak to him, my djinns will strike him."

He got slowly to his feet as he spoke and went towards the entrance to the cave as though to get a better light. By no stretch of imagination could the Chief have imagined that Bob was obeying his order to rise.

Mukazzim spoke angrily to the interpreter and strode menacingly towards Bob. His hand, grasping a short thick rawhide whip, moved suddenly forward. Bob, who had watched him like a lynx, was not caught by surprise. He had been grounded in ju-jutsu at a Commando Train-

ing Centre and had perfected it in the evenings in the desert with Deschamps. His free hand moved like lightning. The Tuareg dropped the whip with a yelp of pain and, caught off balance, hurtled through the mouth of the cave, landing on his knees some yards away. Bob remained in exactly the same spot.

"Tell him I warned him of my djinns," he remarked to the interpreter.

Mukazzim picked himself up, his face distorted with a mixture of fear and fury. Never before had such a thing happened to him. He could not quite understand what had occurred. He had raised his whip to teach this insolent captive stranger a lesson: he had a vague idea that the stranger had gripped his forearm with fingers of steel that had sent streams of fire up his arm and into his shoulder, rendering him as powerless as a baby. Then, in the same moment, his muscles seemed to melt and—was it because of a twist of his arm by some invisible spirit?—he went head-first out through the doorway. Yet all the time this insolent stranger had never moved from where he stood. Mukazzim was a very startled man.

He took a few steps towards the cave where his followers muttered among themselves.

Bob beckoned him imperiously.

"Sit down there and be quiet!" he snapped in English.

If the Tuareg Chief did not understand the words he was quick enough to grasp their meaning. He did what he was told. The handful of counsellors and favourites with him were impressed, and sat down, too.

Bob ignored them, continuing his concentrated examination of the tea-leaves. He appeared puzzled, and kept glancing furtively from the glass to the Chief and back again. He was well aware of the psychological effect of a 'war of nerves.' After a minute he gave an exclamation of annoyance, rinsed the glass and started afresh. Apparently he got the same result.

"Bad!" he exclaimed to himself in Arabic. "Full of foreboding for him."

As he had hoped, Mukazzim whispered to the interpreter.

Bob looked up angrily. Going up to the Chief he seized his right hand and scrutinised the lines on his palm. He set the glass down on the sand beside him. One of the Tuaregs reached out a hand to examine it, but Bob knocked his arm to one side.

"Don't touch!" he snapped, and the man whipped back his hand as though he had been stung.

Bob realised with a sense of elation that the first round was going to him and that he was establishing the initiative. He began to copy the lines of the Chief's hand, drawing them with his finger on the sand. All the time he was searching in his mind for some way to exploit the ascendancy he had gained. What line could he adopt that would frighten and impress Mukazzim?

At last the Chief could stand the suspense no longer.

"What do you see?" he demanded through the interpreter.

"Much," replied Bob. "If this Chief would know what I see and would profit by my warning, let him send these others away that I may speak to him alone."

"Tell me," said Mukazzim, when they had gone.

Bob assumed an expression as solemn as an owl.

"Tell him," he said to the interpreter, "to watch carefully he who is nearest to him that he trusts the least. One who would gain by his death, by betraying him to his enemies, or by seizing his flocks. I see the shadow of so much that is evil standing round him that it is difficult to pick and choose. . . ."

The interpreter spoke rapidly and the Chief looked startled and then thoughtful.

"This man of whom you warn me," he asked. "Is he of my own blood?"

Bob glanced indifferently at the dregs in the glass.

"Maybe. It is possible. The danger comes less from him personally than from what he does. It may come from afar, from towards the rising sun. And there is also news by a messenger from Mecca, who will bring both honour and danger."

The Chief looked thoroughly confused. Bob meant him to be. Mukazzim pulled nervously at his beard.

"Tell me more," he demanded.

Bob told the interpreter to clear away the crowd that was collecting round the entrance to the cave and then to fetch some hot water. The man looked enquiringly at the Chief for permission and received an abrupt nod by way of reply.

Bob began to dissolve a piece of shaving soap in the hot water. Then, with the wet soap, he sealed any leak there might have been where Hamedra had inserted the pencil tube into the base of the cartridge case. Praying inwardly that his efforts would be crowned with success he began to blow bubbles with the soapy water. It worked.

As the fragile iridescent globe grew larger and larger the Chief and the interpreter could see their vague distorted reflections mirrored in its surface.

They leaned forward enthralled by this strange miracle. Bob disengaged the bubble from the bowl of the pipe and sent it floating upwards until it touched the roof and burst.

"Good!" he said, as though satisfied, and blew another bubble which he sent out through the doorway. He blew a third which hovered in the air near the Chief and then floated—owing to a gentle draught created by Bob's sleeve—towards the entrance of the cave.

The Chief seemed expectant of immediate information, but Bob relapsed into solemn silence and resumed his scrutiny of the tea-leaves.

"Harm, trouble, and enemies will assail you," he told the Chief at length. "But although you will be hard pressed, naught will come of it provided you do as I say."

"What must I do?" asked Mukazzim through the interpreter.

Bob considered certain signs he drew in the sand. If the Chief had ever learned to play Noughts and Crosses as a child, he might have regarded the line that ran diagonally through three noughts with less awe than he did.

"How many men have you here?" Bob demanded.

"Eighty," replied the Chief.

"That is well," Bob affirmed with a serious

nod. "Send fifty of them eastward to greet with honour he who comes from Mecca. Let them take gifts of camels, sheep and the finest wheat for bread, for he who comes is of great importance."

The Chief and the interpreter spoke together in low, urgent tones.

"Mukazzim demands how shall his people recognise he who comes from Mecca, for they will never have seen him before? Does he travel in great magnificence?"

"No," replied Bob. "He travels with the simplicity and poverty of all saints and the very great. It is only upstarts and very minor chiefs who love great bodyguards and much display. But they will know him when they meet him. Let the men go eastwards at once, to-day, and take with them food and water for forty days."

Again Mukazzim and the interpreter whispered together urgently.

"The Chief wishes to consult with his Elder Counsellor," the interpreter told Bob.

"Naturally," Bob replied graciously. "I do not expect even a petty chief like Mukazzim to carry out my orders himself. He must instruct such underlings as he may possess."

Apparently the interpreter felt it unnecessary to translate the entire speech. He merely said, "He

says 'yes,' " and went out to find the counsellor in question.

For some minutes the Chief and his adviser jabbered together fiercely. The interpreter had been sent out of earshot. Even so it was obvious to Bob that the counsellor objected to the Chief doing what he had suggested.

Hameda watched the argument with a puzzled frown.

"Master," he said to Bob, "who is this man from Mecca?"

"Haroun al Raschid, Caliph of Baghdad, I expect," replied Bob seriously. "If they do meet a man from Mecca, nothing would surprise me."

Mukazzim shouted for the interpreter. For some minutes the three Tuaregs talked, muttered, and whispered together. Bob, feigning complete indifference, practised various sleight-of-hand tricks with date stones, buttons, and torn-up scraps of paper, thereby distracting Mukazzim's attention and worrying the counsellor.

At length the interpreter turned to Bob.

"My lord, the Chief fears that if he sends fifty of his warriors on a forty-day journey he will become easy prey for his enemies. He will have but thirty men left to guard him."

"Tell him," said Bob, "that ten men to guard

him will be ample. Will he not be signed and under my protection?"

The interpreter translated again.

"How do you mean, 'signed'?" he demanded on behalf of the Chief.

This was an opening for which Bob had hoped but which he had hardly dared expect. He took his signet-ring from its hiding-place in his shorts, showed the Chief the "Eagle's Head proper: surmounted by coronet or"; placed the seal against his tongue and 'signed' the Chief on brow, breast, and the back of each hand with great solemnity.

"Am I safe?" demanded Mukazzim.

"As safe as you ever were," Bob assured him truthfully.

"Will you seal my counsellors also that they may be under your protection?" asked the Chief urgently.

Bob put the ring away unhurriedly.

"Would it not be better," he replied meaningly, "to make sure first which are faithful and which are false? Assuredly, believing you to be unprotected, the false will show themselves. He is fortunate indeed who can say with certainty, when unprotected and afflicted, who are indeed his true and loyal friends and counsellors."

The Tuaregs stood up.

"Thou, at any rate, art my friend," announced

the Chief, and went out, followed by the others.

"Am I?" said Bob in English when Mukazzim had gone. "You might be surprised if you only knew."

A gleam of comprehension began to dawn in Hamedá's expression.

"Master, what exactly have you done?" he asked.

Bob gave a short laugh.

"Frightened the Chief, and turned us, I hope, from slaves into powerful advisers."

"Yes, yes, master. But the fifty men seeking this Haroun al Raschid of Baghdad?"

"They'll be lucky if they meet him, Hamedá," he replied grimly. "But it's easier for us to escape from thirty men with forty camels than from eighty men with a hundred and twenty."

For some seconds Hamedá gazed at him, his face working. Then, as Bob grinned at him, the etiquette and breeding of generations of Moroccan gentlemen broke down. Hamedá squatted suddenly on his haunches and laughed aloud in the presence of his superior.

"*Wallahi!*" he sobbed. "Then it was all humbug—all of it?"

Bob stared at him in astonishment.

"Humbug? Of course it was. From start to finish."

“*Wallahi!* And even I had begun to wonder . . .!” Hameda began to shake again, muttering: “*Wallahi! Haroun al Raschid min Baghdad! Wallahi! Er ragil min el Meqqa! Kham’s ten Askar . . . Baq’ash!*”*

His merriment ceased abruptly as a shadow fell across the mouth of the cave.

* “Ye gods! Haroun al Raschid from Baghdad! The Man from Mecca! Fifty warriors—oh, what a leg-pull!”

CHAPTER X

THE SLAVE-PIT

THREE Tuareg tribesmen entered, bearing rugs and camel saddles.

"My lord Mukazzim begs you to rest yourself and your servant, and to take coffee in his tent while we make this cave worthy of your presence," said the leader in halting, faulty Arabic.

"Haroun al Raschid of Baghdad, travelling from Mecca, will reward you," said Hameda piously, and followed Bob out of the cave.

When they returned an hour later, rugs, cushions, camel saddles, platters of dates and oranges and skins of water had transformed the cave from a prison cell to a luxurious room. Their two rifles were propped against a wall, the ammunition captured with them was piled round the butts.

A slave, his mouth still raw from a ghastly scar caused by the burning out of his tongue, squatted inside the cave.

For the moment Bob forgot everything—Ronnie, Deschamps, Vic; the Desert; Fachi; the fact that he was a captive of the dreaded Mohur-

ren. He remembered only that he was a doctor—that, at any rate, he had completed four of the five years' training. He beckoned the man to follow him into the cave.

"Does this man speak Arabic?" he asked Hameda.

The man himself answered with an inarticulate noise and signified assent by wagging his head.

"Let me see inside your mouth," said Bob.

Fear and terror, horrible to see, showed for a moment in the man's eyes.

"I shall not hurt you," said Bob gently.

The slave looked at Hameda. He, at any rate, was a fellow countryman, possibly a friend.

Hameda smiled and nodded.

"Be not afraid. My master is a good man. You are a Moor?"

The man nodded.

"From near Taroudant?" Hameda went on.

The dumb man shook his head.

"From the South?"

A nod.

"Ouzzazat?" A shake. "Ksar-es-Souk?" A slow shake. "Bon Denib?" A shake. "Kasren-Noud?" A violent nod.

"I know his country," Hameda told Bob. "They are a peaceful, harmless people, tilling

their gardens and tending their flocks. A rich and easy prey for these Mohurren swine."

"Open your mouth," said Bob again.

The man appeared to have acquired a little more confidence. He looked from Hameda to Bob and back again, dumb misery reflected in his eyes.

"Let my master see," urged Hameda.

The slave opened his mouth as wide as his injury permitted. Bob peered inside. The doctor in him was uppermost and he was oblivious to the nauseating horror of the wound. All that he could see, all that he could think of, was if—how—it could be healed and the man's speech restored. The tongue itself was still there, but the red-hot iron had seared the roof of the man's mouth so that to one side the tissues of tongue and palate were fusing and growing together. If an operation could be performed in time . . .

Bob turned to Hameda.

"Can you explain to him what a doctor is? My Arabic isn't good enough."

Hameda broke into a spate of words. The dumb slave listened intently, his eyes looking towards Bob from time to time. It was clear he understood what Hameda was saying.

"Tell him," said Bob, "that if I can get him back to Marrakech or Fez or Rabat—somewhere

where there is a good, up-to-date hospital—I *may* be able to free his tongue so that he can speak again. I cannot promise to succeed, but I *think* I can do it.”

Again Hameda explained. The man’s eyes glowed with hope and he flung himself on the ground to kiss Bob’s feet.

“Steady, steady,” Bob told him in English, with an encouraging smile. “Don’t go counting your chickens before they’re hatched.”

The words may have been incomprehensible to the kneeling man but he understood the sense of them from the tone in which they were uttered. He stood up and waited like a man anticipating orders.

On Bob’s instructions, Hameda explained the ruse for despatching the majority of the tribesmen and camels on a wild-goose chase into the desert. The dumb man grasped the point quickly enough. His cheek muscles moved, indicating that had he been able to, he would have grinned. He nodded his head quickly half a dozen times to show he understood. Hameda went on to emphasise that although Bob was a doctor he was not—most emphatically not—a magician. If they were to escape it would be by hard work, carefully laid plans and the mercy of God. There would be no ‘magic’ about it. Again the man nodded.

"Now," Bob went on to Hamedra, "explain to him that the best place to hide is the last place, often somewhere obvious, where anyone would think of looking for you. Is there anywhere, *inside the camp*, where the three of us could hide for two nights and a day—thirty-six hours—after the warriors have gone off to look for the man from Mecca? When they find we are missing it will be too late to call the others back, and half of the men remaining in camp will be sent stampeding across the desert to look for us. That means we'll only have a dozen men to cope with here instead of about thirty."

The slave nodded again and slapped the flanks of his behind with both palms as Moors do to show approval of a plan or of something they see. To show that he understood what was required of him he pointed to his eyes and then round about the camp.

"Good!" said Bob. "That's the idea."

The man turned to go.

"Master," said Hamedra, "this man cannot tell us his name. What shall we call him so that he may answer when we need him?"

Bob thought for a moment and then laughed.

"Onesimus," he said at length. "I've certainly begotten him in my bonds and I certainly hope

he's going to be profitable both to thee and to me."

Hameda looked slightly bewildered at this Biblical reference, but he nodded.

"Onnysim," was as far as he could get with the pronunciation.

" ' Sim ' will do," said Bob.

The dumb slave evidently understood, and went out.

Bob went to the mouth of the cave. There was much bustling and shouting and excitement. The fifty warriors and the camels under the command of the Chief's head counsellor were preparing to set out to seek the Man from Mecca. They rode away an hour later with much ceremony and such pomp as the denuded camp could provide. Mukazzim evidently took Bob's psychic powers seriously.

Bob realised suddenly how tired he was. How long was it, he wondered, since he had eaten in comfort and slept in peace? Hameda, sensing his thoughts as Moorish servants do, moved quietly across to arrange rugs and cushions. Bob lay down wearily. In a few seconds he was sound asleep.

Darkness had fallen when he awoke to find Onesimus, or Sim, bearing a great basket-work tray piled with boiled wheat, a roast shoulder of

lamb and pots of sweet spicy sauces. The slave squatted in the entrance while they ate, cutting strips of meat for them with his dagger. When they had had enough, he brewed a great brass jug of coffee.

"Where is Mukazzim?" Bob enquired as he sipped the black, scalding liquid.

In dumb-show, Sim replied that he was fasting, praying, and sleeping. Hameda commented irreverently that he was evidently preparing a great spiritual welcome for the Man from Mecca.

Next morning Sim was outside the cave as soon as it was light with coffee and hot, freshly baked bread. A messenger came from Mukazzim to enquire whether they had all they needed and whether all their belongings had been restored. Mukazzim himself intended to spend the day preparing himself to greet the holy pilgrim from Mecca, but he would eat in the evening if Bob and Hameda would visit him. Bob accepted the invitation and the messenger went away again.

It was evident that, for that day anyway, they were to be left to their own devices. Thrown together as they were, with Sim in attendance on both, it was natural that Hameda should become less of a servant and more of a companion than formerly. He had already acquired the knack of understanding Bob's fluent though ungram-

matical Arabic. There had been, of course, occasions when even Hamedra went astray. As, for instance, when Bob had said, one day, that he would dearly like to have a *hammam* (bath) and Hamedra spent the greater part of the morning in a palmery trying to shoot a *hamam* (pigeon).

Bob decided now that the first and most important thing for them to do was to become familiar with the lay-out of the camp and to memorise the lie of the land, and that this should be done before the heat became too oppressive. As they left the cave and strolled towards the centre of the camp they were greeted on all sides with respectful, though not particularly friendly, salutes. No one attempted to bar their way, although Bob and Hamedra were only too conscious of the fact that wherever they went they were followed by a dozen pairs of eyes. They knew, too, that any sign of their plotting to escape would result in a slit throat. . . . A Mohurren would act first and explain to Mukazzim afterwards.

The camp was hidden in a great cup-like hollow surrounded by sheer sandstone walls and approached by a narrow winding ravine, which made it impregnable against attack. It was likewise wide open to siege unless there was some inconspicuous exit for escape. If there was not,

any numerous or well-armed enemy had only to mount guard over the ravine and the Mohurren would be caught like rats in a trap. Yet, thought Bob, a wily and experienced tribe of fighters was unlikely to leave itself liable to annihilation and starvation. Somewhere there must be a "back door" to the stronghold.

Yet that preliminary reconnaissance during the morning showed no sign of it.

At midday Sim brought more hot food. As they ate he made signs to show a man climbing a wall, hiding, and then climbing down the far side.

"You have found what my master wanted?" Hameda demanded, and Sim nodded urgently.

The afternoon dragged slowly towards evening. They had nothing to pack or to prepare. The only belongings they possessed were the two rifles, for Bob's Luger had been dropped and lost in the tussle in the dark when they had been carried off. At sundown a messenger came to escort them to Mukazzim's tent. They found him surrounded by half a dozen of his more villainous-looking cronies. The interpreter occupied a place of honour.

"Greetings, O Prophet," exclaimed Mukazzim.

"Greetings, O Chief," returned Bob, and accepted a pinch of the salt which Mukazzim held out in a small silver box.

"To-night," Mukazzim announced, "you will witness the branding of the slaves and the torturing of the obstinate. A goodly sight fit for men." He pointed to a great tent some twenty yards away. "See there, the strong men heat their irons and whet their knives. Listen, and you will hear the wailing and crying of the weaker prisoners."

"Prisoners?" Bob replied with a frown. "How many prisoners? I saw none this morning as I walked about the camp."

Mukazzim laughed, an evil, cruel chuckle.

"We have eleven, all sound strong men who can be sold for a good price to work in the salt-mines. We have our secret chambers and store-rooms here. Prisoners do not roam at will about the camp."

Bob nodded.

"I guessed as much," he replied calmly. "This stronghold would appear to be a permanent garrison, yet I saw no sign of sufficient food nor yet of a well. Yet I knew that there must be one, for you have ample water."

Mukazzim laughed.

"There are many surprising things about this eagle's nest of ours that our enemies only find out too late. It looks so easy to seal the ravine and starve us out." He stood up. "Come, *Sidi*,

let us go and look at the prisoners. Maybe there are one or two who would please you. We might bargain for them."

He led the way, walking straight towards the face of sandstone cliff to a point where a short pinnacle of rock leaned drunkenly towards the cliff. As they drew near, one of his attendants hurried forward and seized the rock as would a wrestler wrapping his arms round his opponent's body. He leaned all his weight against the stone. Slowly it went over on a pivot-base moving a high, narrow stone block in the face of the cliff. Mukazzim saw the surprise and interest on Bob's face and laughed.

"Swing it back," said Bob, and the Chief's favourite did so. Bob examined the secret doorway carefully. It was a perfect fit, perfectly cut. The join scarcely showed even as much as would a pencil line. It was a magnificent example of skilled stonemason's work.

"The man who cut that rock would make a fortune in the white men's cities," Bob remarked.

Mukazzim shrugged.

"Maybe he did. He's been dead a thousand years."

"A thousand years?" said Bob with a laugh.

"That's a long time."

"Yet it is true. Many hundred years before

the Prophet was born there were lakes and rivers and cities here. There were people who dwelt in holes in the rocks, like foxes, and who lived on the cliff face, like goats. We are told by our grandfathers, who were taught by their father's grandfathers,* that when we came from the East and conquered this desert for our own that these rock hills were the last fortress from which we drove the enemy. It was the stronghold and palace of their Emir, tunnelled like a honeycomb with vaults and store-rooms, prisons and passages, torture chambers and treasure-houses full of silver and the wealth of the south."

"*Hail, Twala! King of the Kukuani!*" muttered Bob to himself, forgetting for the moment the gravity of his predicament.

"The treasure," Mukazzim went on, "is still here, secreted behind these walls of rock. Great caverns full of silver; camel-loads of gold and of stones that shine and glitter. Enormous wealth that would make a man Chief and Ruler of all the tribes of Africa."

"And you, O Chief, are that man!" exclaimed Hamed.

"Alas," replied Mukazzim, shaking his head, "I am not. The treasure is there, it is true. But I know not where, nor how to open the door of

* The Tuareg way of saying, "There is a legend that . . ."

the treasure-house. Yet with my own eyes have I seen it, piled up on the floor to three times the height of a man."

Bob spun round as though he had been stung.

"The devil you have!" he exclaimed. "In that case how is it that you don't know where it is?"

Mukazzim was not to be drawn.

"It is a long story and will serve to while away the time after we have eaten. Let us go on into the wall and inspect the caves."

Once more the stone door swung back enough for three men to walk abreast. There was a peculiar eerie light.

"Take care," warned one of the Chief's attendants, "for the walls burn you to a slow death if you touch them."

"Phosphorus!" exclaimed Bob.

Mukazzim was quick to grasp the recognition in his voice.

"Know you what it is?" he demanded.

"I do indeed," Bob assured him. "In my country, men put it on little pieces of wood and keep them in a box in their pockets, and use them to light lamps and make fires."

The Tuaregs looked surprised and then disbelieving.

"It is true," Hamedas swore solemnly. "I my-

self have used them under the guidance of my master."

"Thou shalt make us some of these fire-producing sticks," said Mukazzim grimly. "Here we use the stuff for another purpose. We paint it on the living flesh of rebels and re-captured slaves, and watch them burn away to bone and rottenness. Look yonder at the place of burning."

Involuntarily Bob's eyes followed the Chief's outstretched finger, and he gave a low exclamation of horror. To one side of the path was a pit piled high, dreadful, gruesome, and malodorous, with phosphorescent bones and skeletons. Luminous skulls grinned horribly in the sepulchral light.

"Thus so we punish our malefactors," repeated Mukazzim grimly, and piloted the party onwards. In another fifty yards they emerged into a circular clearing about a hundred yards in diameter, open to the sky, with sheer precipitous walls providing neither hand- nor foot-hold.

"Behold the well of Slaves!" said Mukazzim.

A dozen coal-black negroes from the South lay on the hard rock, chained hand and foot.

"To-night," Mukazzim went on gloatingly, "we will burn out their tongues."

A surge of blind fury mingled with heart-aching compassion for the helpless slaves sent Bob's hand groping automatically for the pistol that wasn't

there. He would have enjoyed killing Mukazzim then and there.

Hameda sensed the danger in which any violent act of Bob's might involve them. He spoke quietly and without a trace of emotion.

"Was there a slave-pit even in the olden days of which you have spoken, O Chief?" he asked.

Bob looked at him—it was unusual for Hameda to speak without asking Bob's permission—and the moment of tension had passed.

"No," said Mukazzim. "We are told that here they kept the lions to whom the prisoners were fed for the Emir's sport."

He moved nearer to the walls and shouted. A gigantic Senegalese negro lumbered forward like some obscene ape. The Chief rapped out an order and the negro produced flint and steel, set spark to tinder-torch and blew it into a flame.

"See," said Mukazzim. "Yonder the dens in which the lions were kept."

Bob followed him across.

From one of the caves came a low muttering.

"A holy slave," murmured Mukazzim. "One whose mind has been touched by the Hand of Allah."

Bob peered through the flickering shadows cast by the torch. The muttering ceased and Bob saw an elderly man, with a bald pink head and a long,

matted white beard. Suddenly he became conscious, as the negro held the torch lower, of a pair of fierce, piercing blue eyes.

"Ah!" exclaimed the old man. "At last! I'd begun to be afraid you had missed the train. Is this your first visit to Oxford? Did you bring your Gibbon or are you up for the mathematical scholarship? Stupid of me . . . I can't remember . . . oh, dear, I can't remember anything nowadays. The Dean's right—I'll have to take a year's leave . . . a long, long holiday . . . Well, gentlemen, we don't really know for certain whether Hannibal ever got so far south as that, but there's quite an amount—an imposing amount—of circumstantial evidence. . . ."

A University Don, and raving mad! Bob turned abruptly and followed the Chief back to the outer camp where the evening meal was ready.

CHAPTER XI

ESCAPE

THE sights he had witnessed in the slave-pit and the discovery of the demented University Professor weighed heavily on Bob's spirits. Haunting the background of his mind was Mukazzim's fantastic story of the lost treasure. Somehow, too, he would have to prevent the torture of the prisoners. How, heaven alone knew, but Bob prayed unashamedly and sincerely for help and guidance. . . .

The evening meal, as ever roasted lamb, boiled wheat, and a multitude of sweet and peppery sauces, dragged slowly to its end. Mukazzim, fiend and slave raider though he was, possessed the courteous manners of the desert Arab, and entertained his 'guest' with conversation and to the best of his ability. Yet throughout the meal Bob was more conscious of the 'strong men' preparing the red-hot irons and the razor-sharp knives for the ceremony of burning out the tongues of the slaves and the torture of any who had displeased the Mohurren Chief, than he was of the small talk in which Mukazzim indulged through the interpreter.

The last platters and bowls were removed and the torturers rolled up the side of their tent, exhibiting the glowing braziers, the irons, the gleaming knives, and the cruel steel-spiked pincers. The head torturer, with a chest like a barrel and stripped to a loin-cloth, his polished stone arm-bands giving him the appearance of some neolithic ape, came forward, demanding permission for the night's 'sport' to commence. Mukazzim accorded it with an airy wave of the hand and went on talking.

"The treasure is beyond the power of man to count," he was saying. "But none yet have found it." He leaned forward and his voice sank to a cruel, grating whisper: "If thy powers of seeing that which is hidden from the sight of ordinary men can find it, thou mayst take ten camel loads and be free. If not, maybe the Hand of Allah will sit upon thee with that other. . . ."

Hameda sat bolt upright suddenly as the interpreter repeated the Chief's words in Arabic. As though by a flash of light Bob saw his opportunity as he grasped Mukazzim's meaning.

He laughed contemptuously.

"It would be easy, Mukazzim, had I but the pictures-that-speak and the needle-that-always-points-to-the-truth with me. They would show me where it is."

Mukazzim looked bewildered.

"The-pictures-that-speak? The needle-that-always-points-to-the-truth? What things are these?"

Hameda jumped into the breach. He explained in voluble and excited Arabic to the Chief's interpreter. Never before had a pack of soiled patience cards and a prismatic compass been described with such flowery phraseology or such a wealth of inaccurate detail.

Mukazzim's face became more and more crestfallen as Hameda's rigmarole continued, especially when he finished up:

"O Chief, thou hast but thyself to thank! Had you come to my master as one honourable man to another and told him of the lost treasure-houses he would have come to aid thee without demur. But you fell upon us like thunderbolts in the night, ravished our camp and brought us away bound! My master's magic charms lie lost and scattered among the sand and stones of the desert. With them he could have found thy trumpery silver in the space of time it takes a man to count ten. Without them, what can he do?"

"Is that true?" Mukazzim demanded of Bob.

Bob nodded. "Assuredly!"

For a few moments Mukazzim sat lost in thought. Then he smote his thigh.

"Then at sunrise shall my two best trackers set off to retrace their steps," he exclaimed. "They shall search every stone, every grain of sand if need be, until they find these things." He stopped suddenly as a thought struck him. "No spell will come upon them if they pick them up?" he demanded with a lowering of his brows.

"No," said Bob. "Not unless they meddle and interfere with them. . . . But perhaps——" He broke off abruptly and held up his hand for silence. Not a man moved. Bob stared straight in front of him with the fixed gaze of a sleep-walker. Slowly, stiffly, he got to his feet and walked, with jerky, automaton-like steps, some fifteen yards into the gloom beyond the camp-fire. Then he stopped and turned towards the cliff face from which came the wailing of the prisoners, only too conscious of the agonising ceremony awaiting them.

Hameda, quick on the uptake, whispered to the Chief to have them taken back behind the stone door where they could not be heard. Bob, still with the fixed, expressionless stare, came slowly back towards the group who watched him intently. Fierce, implacable warriors though they were in battle, knowing not the faintest inkling of physical fear, there was awe and superstitious dread of the Unknown on every man's face. Bob

gave a silent sigh of relief, and thanked God. The first part of his harum-scarum plan had worked. He walked, like a man in a trance, from one camp-fire to another, and then finally selected a long burning stick. Holding this in front of him, he returned to his original place facing the cliff. Slowly he began to make passes and patterns in the air with the flaming brand, all the while reciting solemnly:

“The boy stood on the burning deck,
His breeches wanted mending.”

Along with his hobby of conjuring he had learned ventriloquism as a useful stage effect. He was out of practice, and his heart began to beat a little faster. Dare he risk it? With a silent prayer for help, he threw his voice so that to Mukazzim and the group around him it appeared that an unseen man spoke from the shadows between them and Bob. If Bob had hoped to impress them he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. With a low wail of fear they huddled together, fumbling for the charms that hung round their necks, and muttering prayers to preserve them from the Evil Eye. Even Hamedra was considerably startled, and that fact communicated itself to the others. The ‘strong men,’ out of earshot but aware that something queer

was taking place, congregated uneasily at one end of their tent.

Bob came slowly back to his place beside the Chief, and sat down.

"Water!" he whispered weakly.

A dozen trembling hands filled a skin cup and held it to his lips. He sipped it slowly and 'came-to' with the air of a man recovering consciousness.

"My spirit has been a long, long way," he said, and then deliberately relapsed into silence, leaning against Hamedra as though tired out. Bob knew only too well that he had Mukazzim and his little band of favourites on tenterhooks. If he kept them waiting long enough, he would have them completely under his thumb.

For some minutes he feigned to be asleep. Then he opened his eyes and stared directly at Mukazzim.

"Hearken, Mukazzim," he said suddenly, with a note of authority that made even Hamedra jump. "That the treasure is hidden from you is a judgment on you and your tribe. My eyes and my spirit have been along the path that leads to the treasure house. Yet I, even I, could not reach it for it is guarded by the spirits of hundreds who have died at the hands of thy tribe and who hunger for revenge. They are angry. Too much unnecessary blood has been spilt already. Too

many have died in agony, and with hate of thee in their hearts and on their lips. Their spirits and their thoughts live on. . . . I have spoken with them and they have answered me."

"Aye, aye," chorused the Mohurren counsellors. "With our own ears we heard them but our eyes saw no man."

Mukazzim seemed ill at ease.

"What should I do?" he demanded.

"For the space of a year and a day," Bob went on, "there must be neither the killing of slaves or burning or torture. . . . The spirits must be placated and dispersed. Only a fool would send more to join those already there to impede thee. . . . The bones must be taken from the pit to a place one mile outside the camp and buried deep, one body to one grave. Then must each slave and captive in thy camp be given a camel, water, and food and set free to return to his people. Before he sets out, thou or thy chief counsellor must embrace each slave sixty times, that sixty slaves whose vindictive spirits wait there before the treasure-house may be pacified and depart to their proper place." He stood up abruptly. "See thee to these matters this night, for time is short and the spirits whisper against thee. Tomorrow at this time, maybe, my spirit will be able to enter the treasure-house. I sleep!"

Followed by Hameda, he strode back to the cave. 1

Sim was squatting just outside the entrance, waiting for them. From behind them came the noise of shouting, argument, and general uproar. There could be no doubt that Bob had put the cat among the pigeons.

"He will do as you have said," Hameda affirmed confidently. "He is so avaricious and anxious to get his hands on that treasure that he would allow his own tongue to be burnt out if you had told him to."

"Maybe," retorted Bob. "But I've lessened the odds against us still more. At the same time I've made a very fine rod for my own back. Onesimus, my lad, you've got to get us out of here by to-morrow night at the very latest."

Sim nodded to show that he understood. Stooping down he drew a clock-face in the sand. He pointed to the Great Bear and then to ten o'clock.

"Ten o'clock now?" asked Hameda, and Sim nodded again. Then he pointed to Bob, Hameda, and himself and went through a pantomime of stealthy movement, after which he put his finger on three o'clock.

"I see," said Bob. "We start at three." He glanced at Hameda, who seemed doubtful as to

the wisdom of so early a start. "Maybe it's a good idea. If Mukazzim is liberating the slaves to-night and we happen to be noticed, they'll probably think we're just watching them go."

"It'll be a pity about us if they don't," replied Hameda grimly, and they lay down for a few hours' sleep.

The camp was silent when Sim awoke them. They picked up their rifles and followed him stealthily out into the darkness. Keeping close to the face of the cliff he led them for about fifty yards to a narrow crevice in the rocks, through which he squeezed. After a few steps the path was blocked by a great circular stone. Sim seized Hameda's hands and made it clear that he needed help to move the great rock to one side. The stone moved easily, revealing a cavern into which they crawled on hands and knees.

Sim was evidently well acquainted with the place, for he felt around in the darkness for an iron bar which he inserted in a hole in the wall and pushed. The circular stone moved back silently into place. He placed Bob's hand in Hameda's belt and Hameda's hand on his own shoulder. Then he moved slowly forward and began to mount a flight of roughly-cut steps. There were twenty of them leading to a flat interior courtyard open to the sky, similar to but less deep

than the slave-pit. Sim motioned them to sit down and wait.

After about an hour the sky began to lighten and they could see that they were in a disused store-house. Bob stared about him and wondered whether Sim had merely succeeded in guiding them out of the frying-pan into the fire. So far as he could see there was no back door through which they could escape if necessary.

"Shades of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves!" muttered Bob as it grew lighter and he could see more clearly across the base of the pit. Arranged in rows on the far side were several dozen earthenware jars about six feet in diameter and eight feet high.

"What are they for?" Bob asked Hamed.

"For storing grain and dates against siege or famine," replied the Moor.

A roughly made stool enabled them to climb up and peer into the jars.

"We shan't starve, anyway," said Bob, relieved. "What about water?"

Sim pointed to a well, half hidden among the jars and covered with a stone lid. Hamed moved the lid to one side and looked in.

"Plenty," he affirmed.

Time dragged heavily and as the sun mounted higher in the sky the store-pit became like an

oven. They sat in the shade at the top of the steps. The silence was intense.

"There's one point we've overlooked," exclaimed Hameda suddenly. "If Mukazzim counts his camels he will know that we are hiding somewhere close at hand. If we had escaped, he would be three camels short."

Sim gesticulated excitedly. It took more than an hour of question and answer, elimination, and pantomime before they understood what he tried to convey. In the bustle and excitement of the liberation of the slaves, Sim had taken three camels and hobbled them in a secluded alcove in the rocks outside. They were well-fed beasts and muzzled, so that they would take no harm by being left unattended for forty-eight hours and could not attract attention by roaring. After that he had slipped back unobtrusively into camp to wake them in the early hours.

"How on earth are we going to get out of here?" Bob asked. "Mukazzim's camp will be like a hornets' nest by now."

Night came at last. Darkness had fallen for some hours when Sim got to his feet and showed by signs that he proposed to go through the tunnel and see what was going on in the camp. He was gone about half an hour and Bob could remember few occasions when half an hour had

seemed longer. On returning, Sim motioned them to follow him. The great stone that sealed the entrance to the inner cave moved over in silence and, rather than risk the slightest sound in rolling it back, they left it where it was."

They moved stealthily along the short path that terminated in the entrance to the crevice. The silence was so intense that the faint click as Bob pushed forward the safety catch of his rifle sounded almost like a clap of thunder.

Sim led the way, apparently possessed of a cat-like ability to see in the dark. The camp seemed deserted. Evidently Bob's scheme for causing various parties of warriors to be sent out on wild-goose chases had succeeded up to, if not beyond, his expectations. For a moment or two Sim stood silent and motionless as a statue, turning his head from side to side, and sniffing. It was clear that he sensed that something was amiss. Then Bob realised what it was. There was neither glow of dying fires nor the smell of cooking. Sim pressed them back into the deeper shadows and vanished with the swift, feline silence of a cat. A minute later he was back again. Somehow, in the darkness, he managed to convey to Hameda that there were but two men left to guard the stronghold.

Nevertheless they did not relax their caution

as Sim piloted them through the ravine and out on to the open desert.

The camels were still where he had hidden them. As Sim bent to unfasten the knee-hobbles he made a queer inarticulate sound. Hamed saw at once what had caused it and his rifle was at the 'ready' in a split second. The camels' knee-ropes had been lashed tight—tight enough to stop all circulation and cripple them for days, if not for ever.

From the darkness came a cruel, mocking laugh. Mukazzim's Tuareg warriors surrounded them, their rifles levelled steadily over rocks. Hamed fired from the hip and went flat on his face almost before the sound of the shot had begun to echo along the cliff face. A shrill scream of pain showed that his bullet had found a mark.

Bob threw himself down and more by luck than good judgment found himself protected by a slight fold in the ground. Sim had disappeared, apparently into thin air. Four shots rang out from the Tuaregs on the rocks. Bob aimed at the muzzle-flashes and pressed the trigger. Somebody's rifle clattered on the stones. Simultaneously Hamed fired again and there was the dull thud of a body falling heavily.

Sim crawled back to take up a position between Bob and Hamed. He wiped the blade of

a curved dagger on his sleeve and now carried a rifle.

From the darkness around them they could hear the Tuaregs calling to one another. Bob and Hamedra fired together in the direction of one particular voice. There was a scuffle, and after that the talking ceased.

Bob began to crawl nearer to Hamedra, but a shot from the rocks overhead and the vicious smack of a heavy slug on the sand a few inches from his shoulder persuaded him to abandon the idea.

Dawn showed once more in the eastern sky. Hamedra, with a sudden spurt and a squirm like an eel, covered the half-dozen yards that separated him from Bob. A fusillade of shots followed him, but too late. He had reached the sanctuary of the shallow trough in which Bob and Onesimus lay.

As it grew lighter both sides could see to pick out their targets. By sunrise the slightest movement on either side resulted in a rifle duel. Bob's cheek and Sim's hands were badly gashed by splinters of stone. Hamedra had a nasty flesh wound on the leg. It was not possible for them to tell what damage they had inflicted on the Mohurren, but there appeared to be about six fewer rifles in action.

Four Tuaregs suddenly commenced rapid fire.

"Careful, master!" exclaimed Hamed, gritting his teeth against the pain of his leg. "They intend to rush us."

Even as he spoke ten Tuaregs leapt from the ground and hurled themselves forward, their long daggers gleaming evilly in the early morning sunlight.

Bob knew that he shot one of them right through the heart and that Sim brought down another.

Then from behind them came a sudden withering volley of shots. The Tuaregs faltered, four more of them pitched headlong among the stones, and the rest bolted for the cover of the rocks. Bob turned his head . . . a dozen white-robed Arabs poured shot after shot at the rocks among which the Mohurren had taken cover. The fusillade ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and Bob saw the white-robed Arabs charge as though from a catapult.

It was incredible—impossible—a dream. For the man who raced ahead, leaping from rock to rock in his eagerness to come to grips with the Mohurren, was his young brother, Vic.

CHAPTER XII

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN

THE Mohurren, although heavily outnumbered, fought back like fiends, and the white-robed Bambaras, led by Vic and Deschamps, did not have matters all their own way. Nevertheless within ten minutes the Mohurren had been obliterated. Mukazzim, with five bullets in his body, fought to the bitter end with superb courage.

Deschamps tactfully kept out of the way until after the two brothers had had some minutes together. Then Bob and Hamedra, with Sim in close attendance, led the Bambara into the Mohurren stronghold. Ten men, specially selected by Seyid Bakr for their prowess and accuracy with a rifle, were told off to guard and defend the entrance to the ravine.

The camp was deserted. Even the two men who had been there when Bob, Hamedra, and Sim had crept out in the darkness, had vanished. Bob, Vic, Deschamps, Hamedra, Fuhazi, Sim, and Seyid Bakr made an immediate tour of the slave-pit. Not a single prisoner remained. Even the University Professor had gone—whither, no one

knew. Bob swore softly to himself at the thought of the helpless, demented old man wandering alone, miles from water, in that terrible^f furnace-like desert outside.

✶ The brothers, Bob and Victor, Hamed and Fuhazi, were too happy in their reunion to talk much. They compared notes on their respective experiences, but their affection, one for the other, made any greater demonstration of their feelings unnecessary.

The Bambara were all over the camp, Sim guiding them to such secret hiding-places and store-houses as he knew. There were dates, water, and grain in plenty, a few sheep and goats and a large supply of gunpowder and soft metal rods for cutting into slugs.

But Seyid Bakr was worried. After an hour's searching through the rocks and catacombs his men had not discovered a single Mohurren tribesman. Somewhere, he maintained, they must be lying hidden in some secret gallery, ready to open fire and to pounce as soon as he and his men should be off their guard.

Bob laughed, and described the ruse by which he had sent fifty men and a hundred camels scouring the desert for a mythical Hadji from Mecca, while others should be searching for him, Onesimus and Hamed. There were fifteen

Mohurren slain in the morning battle, including Chief Mukazzim himself. Seyid Bakr gave a grim throaty chuckle but otherwise remained silent.

"Fifty men," he said at length. "Well, they should be safely out of the way for another week or two. There are fifteen dead, so that there are fifteen left, possibly split into two or three small parties, for us to deal with. We can manage them all right!" He got up and walked away.

"Drat the Mohurren!" Bob said to Deschamps. "It's that old Professor I'm worried about. He doesn't stand a chance of survival. Think of the heat, the lack of water—no sense of direction and no one to look after him."

"Maybe," replied Deschamps. "But I think you're being rather gloomy. If Mukazzim turned him loose with the others, they'll look after him. They'd regard a harmless, mad old man as a rattling good mascot."

Bob glanced covertly at Seyid Bakr.

"I know you and Vic have a good deal to thank this chap for," he said quietly, "but—I'm sure there's a 'but' to it somewhere."

"Why?" demanded Vic. "He's been pretty decent."

"I've a horrible feeling that Bob's right," said Deschamps. "I know he saved our lives, and

for that I'm deeply and properly grateful, but I'm equally sure that there's a *quid pro quo* somewhere in the background."

"A *quid pro quo*?" echoed Vic. "Don't be ridiculous! We were more than three parts dead and we hadn't got two-penn'orth of booty between us. What ulterior motive could he have had?"

Deschamps lay back in the shade of a great rock and stretched his legs.

"He was out to attack the Mohurren. That much was pretty obvious from the start. In spite of our exhaustion we still hung on to three first-class modern repeating rifles. We were a wind-fall capable of providing considerable fire-power, reckoned in terms of gas pipes and muzzle loaders. Q.E.D. It wasn't us, but our rifles that he really wanted."

Vic flung a stone at the face of the rock.

"Oh, rubbish!" he exclaimed impatiently. "In that case, why didn't he just grab the rifles and leave us where we were? There was nothing to stop him."

"Three men with modern rifles are worth nine with gas pipes," said Bob. "I see the point. Deschamps may be right."

"All right," said Vic. "So what? He saved our lives. We won his battle for him. Call it

all square. What's he going to do now he's captured this place?"

"I haven't the least idea," retorted Deschamps. "And quite honestly I haven't the very slightest desire to stay and find out." He gave a sudden grin. "Nevertheless I'd be delighted to come back later on with a few sticks of dynamite and look for that treasure Bob was talking about this morning."

"Ah!" said Bob. "Now you're talking! But don't forget we want Ronnie in on that party."

"Most emphatically," agreed Deschamps quietly. "We owe Ronnie that. Meanwhile we ought to do something pretty drastic about resuming our journey to Smara."

Hameda came suddenly from behind a rock and squatted beside them. It was obvious he was considerably disturbed.

"What's wrong?" Bob demanded. "Where are Sim and Fuhazi?"

Hameda wasted no words.

"Sim and I were in the passage leading into the Pit of Slaves when we heard Seyid Bakr talking to one of his counsellors. I heard him say: 'They will fetch a good price if we take them to Smara,' so we went deeper into the shadows at one side and listened. My masters, we must get

away at once. Seyid Bakr plans to seize us and sell us as slaves."

"Blow me up a palm tree!" remarked Deschamps. "My hunch was right."

"What a cad!" exclaimed Vic.

"The point is," interposed Bob thoughtfully, "how are we going to get out? There is a secret way but Sim doesn't know it, and there are ten picked shots guarding the mouth of the only exit we know of."

"What happened to their camels—the ten on guard, I mean?" asked Deschamps.

"They were driven inside with the rest of them," replied Hamedra.

"Drat it, then!" Deschamps stood thinking for a moment in silence. "Find Sim!" he ordered.

Sim came.

"Is there any grazing for half a dozen camels at the mouth of the ravine?" Deschamps demanded.

Sim nodded, and by placing small pieces of palm leaf among stones explained that there were a few bushes on which a few camels might browse.

"Good!" exclaimed the Frenchman. "Hamedra, can you and Fuhazi persuade Seyid Bakr to let you take eight camels to graze out there?"

Hamedra went off without a word. He selected eight good camels and without a word to Seyid

Bakr or anyone else he drove them out of the camp.

"What I like about that lad," said Bob ironically, "is his sense of directness. He doesn't waste time arguing the toss."

"What happens now?" asked Vic.

Deschamps rubbed his hands together and grinned cheerfully.

"*Vive les Saboteurs! Vive la Résistance!* What-ho, she bumps, my lad! I want one of those sacks of gunpowder we captured."

Sim brought it, about fifteen pounds at a time, in bags made of an old head-cloth and tied round his waist out of sight. The whole operation lasted some hours.

Vic and Deschamps, looking almost suspiciously innocent, went for a quiet stroll among the rocks bordering the walls of the ravine. After about an hour Deschamps found what he was looking for—a small cavity beneath an overhanging ledge of rock.

"Tell Hamedra to come here with Sim, and to carry all the gunpowder they can. Also to bring about three yards of camel-hair rope soaked in oil. Then tell Bob and Fuhazi to keep their eyes and ears open for any signs of dirty work at the crossroads. We'll have a council of war later on when I get back. . . . I'd give my ears for a

dozen sticks of gelignite and a couple of tins of dynamite."

He came back with Hameda and Sim' a couple of hours later, just as Seyid Bakr sent over a roast shoulder of mutton and some boiled wheat.

"Mutton!" grunted Bob. "Ye gods, how I hate the sight of it! In the last three weeks I've eaten more sheep than you could find in a flock on the Sussex Downs. Who'd like a great big golden-brown grilled Dover sole and a plateful of chips?"

"Shut up!" said Vic. "Serve you right if we get a bit of stringy goat to-morrow."

"Listen, 'everybody," said Deschamps in Arabic. "Now for a council of war. Let's have it as though we were just chatting over food and not having a proper conference. Eat as much as you can, my merry lads, because by this time to-morrow night we'll either be in the slave-pit, dead, or doing our best on dates and water. Bob—Fuhazi, what's been going on here this afternoon?"

"Nothing much," Bob replied. "Most of the Bambara seem pretty tired and have been sleeping. Seyid Bakr has been wandering about with three or four henchmen in and out of the catacombs and dungeons, apparently looking for the

secret door to the back way out. He's left us severely alone."

"Good!" Deschamps nodded. "Well now, listen carefully. I've rammed about a hundred-weight of gunpowder tightly into a small cavity in the side of the rock near the mouth of the entrance to the ravine, and I've laid a fuse of greasy camel-hair rope. It should work. As soon as it's dark Hamedra will go to the ten men guarding the ravine with a bogus message from Seyid Bakr that eight of them are to come into camp. We'll rush the other two. Then I'll touch off the fuse and with any luck we'll bring down enough rock to seal the passage. It will either bottle them up completely or delay them until daylight. Then we'll beat it as fast as we can across the desert for Smara. Any questions?"

"Yes," said Vic. "How do we leave here? If we all set off at once we'll be a bit obvious, won't we?"

Deschamps nodded again.

"Good point, Vic! Slip off one at a time at about five-minute intervals. Fuhazi first, then Bob, then Vic, then Hamedra, Sim next, and lastly me. Go straight on to the end of the ravine and keep well in among the rocks to the left-hand side. Fuhazi will meet you and guide you to a cubby hole we've agreed on as a rendezvous. I'll

come last, put a match to the fuse, see that it is burning all right, and then run like blazes to get clear before the whole cliff comes down."

"That's clear enough," said Bob. "Zero hour?"

"Fuhazi will start immediately after Hamedra has set off with the bogus message. That reminds me. One more point. If Hamedra succeeds, the eight guards will pass us in the ravine. When you hear or see them, duck down and keep well out of sight until they're past you. That quite clear?"

Everything went according to plan. The eight Bambara were just emerging from the ravine as Deschamps stepped silently and unobtrusively into the shadows. He had hoped for a longer start, realising that as soon as Seyid Bakr knew of the bogus message, he would 'smell a rat.' The Frenchman decided to trust to his speed as runner and made straight for the open sandy track in the centre of the ravine. He had covered over a hundred yards when Seyid Bakr's cry of alarm echoed faintly from wall to wall of the chasm. It would take a minute or so for Seyid Bakr to discover that they were missing, and in that time Deschamps hoped to gain an unbeatable start.

The Bambara fired their rifles blindly in the darkness up the ravine. One or two bullets

whistled by unpleasantly close, serving only to lend wings to his heels. Hameda had heard the shooting and was standing, with his rifle at the ready, in the centre of the path beside the ambush. As Deschamps darted to the side to put a match to the fuse, Hameda let off half a dozen shots and then, on Deschamps' warning shout, took to his heels.

They reached the hide-out and flung themselves panting on the ground as a great orange flash lit the heavens and, with a terrific roar, the cliff face collapsed. Ton after ton of rock and boulder avalanched into the chasm. The treacherous Seyid Bakr and his Bambara tribesmen were sealed up as securely as in a prison.

"That's that," said Bob. "Good work, Henri."

"More successful than I bargained for, I'm afraid," replied the Frenchman regretfully. "I meant to come back here in a few months' time and find the Mohurren treasure. From the noise of that avalanche I should say that that ravine is blocked up for ever."

"There'll be time enough to think about that when we've got Ronnie out of Smara," said Bob grimly. "Sufficient unto the day are the doings thereof."

"Time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted!" quoted Vic with impudent solemnity.

"I can't see that that ravine need matter tuppence—we can get in through the slave-pit."

"It's all right, Henri," said Bob. "He gets taken like that every now and again. Overtired and too much excitement, I expect."

Hameda and Fuhazi brought the camels.

"Just out of curiosity, Vic," said Deschamps as they mounted, "I'd like to know how you propose to get into the slave-pit if you can't get through the ravine."

Vic laughed.

"Elementary, my dear Watson. My supercilious brother isn't very good at applying his knowledge, no matter how good he may be at applying poultices and sticking-plaster. He and Hameda have both said that the pit is open to the sky. The answer is a search by helicopter and a supply of rope ladders. We ought to be able to find these rocks all right if we can work out a rough bearing from Fachi. Quite simple, really, if one applies a little thought to the matter."

"That'll be all from you, Victor," said Bob. "I've applied other things besides poultices and sticking-plaster to a certain part of your anatomy before to-day."

"Vic, you've hit it!" exclaimed Deschamps. "They're pretty certain to have a helicopter I could hire at La Senia aerodrome outside Oran."

"We've got to get Ronnie out first," Bob repeated. "Lead on, Macduff."

Deschamps regarded the compass.

"Sou'west by west for a start. Let's go."

Followed by Fuhazi and Sim they set out once more into the trackless unknown wastes.

"By the way," said Deschamps suddenly in Arabic, "what happened to the two remaining Bambara?"

Hameda laughed gently.

"I took care of them, my master. That dagger from Fachi has a blade like a razor."

CHAPTER XIII

IN SIGHT OF SMARA

A WEEK later the wild desolate desert of Ga's stretched indefinitely before them. Limitless bright yellow sand, broken only by outcroppings of black lava-like rock, extended in every direction. They camped for the night on the open plain, using enough and no more of their scarce and carefully hoarded supply of fuel to boil the ever scarcer and more precious water for coffee.

"You know," said Deschamps, as he scoured his coffee-mug with a handful of sand, "that treasure cave of the Mohurren draws me as strongly as a magnet draws iron filings. It's an irresistible bait. With luck we should reach Smara in another ten days now. My plans are : one, get Ronnie; two, go home for a rest and a re-fit, and then come back to Mukazzim's lair and hunt for that treasure till we find it."

"Lovely!" said Vic. "I'm on! We'll have Hamed and Fuhazi and Sim. If only Sim can talk by then!"

"He will if I can operate within a month," put in Bob. "Give me time to take my M.S. and I'll

come with you! Anyway, it'd take a better man than Deschamps to stop me! And that old Professor—we ought to find out more about him if it's possible."

"We could find out who he is anyway," Vic reflected. "If we went to Oxford and made enquiries, somebody's bound to have noticed some don has been missing for a few years. Besides, if the slaves got away from the Mohurren and reached one of the villages in Southern Morocco we ought to pick up his trail easily enough on our way back."

"I'm worried about that old man," Bob went on. "I suppose it's only an association of ideas, but somehow he made me think of the old monk in Monte Cristo's prison."

"Great Scott, yes!" exclaimed Vic. "I see what you mean. He may know something or possess some clue that would show us where the treasure was."

"Yes," said Deschamps slowly. "It's an idea. We'll certainly have to find the old man. He might be an extremely valuable source of information, especially if he was there before—so to speak—Mukazzim came to the throne. How old do you reckon he was, Bob?"

Bob shook his head.

"Hard to say. You've got to remember that

he was mental, and many of the usual clues to a person's age wouldn't show. On the other hand, he's probably lived in hell, especially if he has intervals of lucidity. I'd guess him at sixty to sixty-five."

"H'm!" said Deschamps. "I wonder how long he'd been a prisoner."

"Sim might know," Vic suggested.

Deschamps put the question to the dumb man, but it was only after a long session of questions and answers that they could learn that the old Professor had been a prisoner for many, many years. How long, Onesimus did not know.

"Look here," said Bob. "We can't leave the old boy to wander about in the desert. When we've got Ronnie we'll have to make our way back to the villages east of Ksar-es-Souk and look for him. If he's still alive we must get him back home."

Vic looked across the dying fire at his elder brother.

"It's possible, isn't it, Bob, that if we *could* get him back to Oxford his mind might click back into place?"

"Quite possible," agreed his brother. "But from our point of view it mightn't be a success. It could easily result in him having a blank extending over so many years, remembering nothing

about what had happened to him, where he'd been, what he'd seen or anything."

"That wouldn't suit us at all," Deschamps agreed. "We want to restore him to sanity, but if he has learned anything about the Mohurren treasure we want him to remember it. Is there any chance of it, Bob?"

Bob prodded the ashes of the fire with a bit of stick.

"Maybe, maybe not," he replied non-committally. "I only saw him for a moment, hoping and expecting to get a chance to look at him medically later on. My guess is that when he was captured he got a crack on the head that flattened the bone—what we call 'compression of the brain.' If he was operated on and the part pressing on the brain lifted, his memory would 'click back into place' as Vic puts it, but he would remember nothing—nothing whatsoever—of the intervening period."

Deschamps sat silent for some moments.

"We're rather building castles in the air. The old chap may not know anything at all. If he's been shut up in the lion's cage all the time it's ten to one he won't. But suppose he does, and your diagnosis of compression is correct, would it be the slightest use to try and question him?"

"Not the very least," said Bob definitely.

"Not even under a properly induced hypnosis?" shot out the Frenchman.

"We could try it," Bob retorted. "It was done quite a bit with 'lost identity' people during and after the war. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't."

Vic settled down to go to sleep.

"First catch your Professor, then question him," he remarked with a yawn. "Shut up, you two, and go to sleep. Who'd like a great big ginger beer with lumps of ice clinking about in it?"

"In this desert all sorts of strange things can happen," murmured Deschamps. "Little boys' throats have been cut for making less aggravating remarks than that."

Another sixty miles had been covered before they made camp the following night. Coffee had been boiled and Hameda had baked bread in the hot ashes of the fire when Fuhazi spoke.

"My masters, if we knew for certain that we should reach the next water-hole to-morrow, all would be well. But we are not certain, and we may not reach it until the next day. To-night, I think we should push on. We are running short of water. Besides, we must find something for the camels. If Allah is gracious, there should be scrub or thorn bush as we near the water-hole."

After an hour or so's rest, they remounted their tired camels and rode on. It needed about an hour to dawn when Hamedra, who was riding some hundred yards or so in front, wheeled his camel and trotted back.

"Caution, my masters!" he called in a low voice. "Ahead, an hour's ride on, I can see three camp-fires close together."

"Oh, curse it!" exclaimed Bob. "Every time we spot a camp-fire it means trouble. Who's it likely to be, Henri?"

Deschamps shrugged in the darkness.

"Tuaregs for a certainty. Q'ada, or more Mohurren, I should imagine. We're too far west for the Haggaren. We'd better stay here till it's light and then have a look-see. What do you say, Hamedra?" he finished up in Arabic.

"I am wondering, master. Can that be the water-hole where they are encamped?"

"Not unless I'm forty to fifty miles out in my reckoning."

"In that case, my masters, I suggest we make a detour and ride fast and hard to get to the water-hole first. These men were either there yesterday or plan to be there to-morrow night. If they should prove to be Mohurren . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

"Quite!" said Bob. "I've seen all I want to

of the Mohurren for a year or so to come. Come along, Archidamus," he went on, addressing his camel, "pull your socks up and get a move on."

They struck off to the south for some fifteen miles and then turned westwards, pushing the camels as hard as they dared right through the heat of the day. Late in the afternoon they found the water-hole, deserted.

Hameda and Fuhazi rode forward and scrutinised the ground around the mouth of the well.

"No man has been here for two weeks," Hameda announced.

"There'll be about thirty in an hour," said Vic viciously, and pointed to the north-east. "Here they come, the blighters! Just as we thought we'd beaten them to it."

Deschamps swore silently.

"Get ready in case of trouble," he ordered. "It'd be fatal to bolt now, even if we had time to get up enough water for the camels. We'll have to sit tight and hope luck's on our side for once."

Meanwhile Hameda, Fuhazi, and Sim worked furiously at the windlass to fill the drinking-troughs for the camels and to fill their goat-skin water-bags. Vic, Deschamps, and Bob watched the rapidly approaching cloud of dust that indicated a caravan of some size. Before long

they saw a dozen blue-robed tribesmen wheel off from the main party and ride at full gallop towards them.

"They're not Mohurren, anyway," Deschamps said, an unmistakable note of relief in his voice.

"How can you tell at this distance?" asked Vic.

"By their saddle-bags. Each tribe has its own distinctive colour: the Q'ada black, the Haggaren a vivid purple they get from the juice of a cactus, and the Mohurren scarlet. I can't tell at this distance whether they're purple or black, but they're certainly not red."

"Anyway," said Bob, "we'll know the worst in a minute."

They walked slowly towards the oncoming Tuaregs, three of whom urged their camels even faster and then brought them to a halt.

"Who are you and whence do you come?" challenged their leader.

"Q'ada!" exclaimed Deschamps, and then shouted back, "From Fachi, even as you do yourselves, except that we have fought with and escaped from Mukazzim of the Mohurren."

The three Tuaregs came forward at a trot, leaped from their camels and embraced Deschamps with respect and affection. For some minutes they jabbered to him in what, to Bob and

Vic, was a series of incomprehensible gutturals. Then, leaping on their camels, they raced back to the main party.

"That's a stroke of 'luck," said Deschamps. "They're the same mob that were besieging Fachi. Their Sheikh is a villainous old swine but he and I knew each other of old. We'll get some decent food for once, anyway. How'd you like roast chicken, Vic?"

"Shut up," Vic retorted. "That's not funny. It's cruelty to children, and darn' bad form. Mutton and dates, dates and mutton! If I eat much more of either I'll start growing leaves and if you prod me in the tummy I'll probably go 'baa.' Chicken! Don't talk about it, you brute!"

"Tut, tut!" said Bob with a grin. "The poor boy's hungry. So am I, if it comes to that, but even so I agree with Vic about the mutton. I hate the sight of the stuff by now."

"All right, all right," retorted Deschamps. "All I said was, 'How'd you like a roast chicken?' because, unless I'm backing the wrong horse, that's what you'll get for supper to-night."

"Where on earth are they going to come from?"

Deschamps laughed.

"The Q'ada eat more chicken than anything else. I'll bet ten pounds to a penny that they've got scores of them in that caravan. Their diet is part of their religion."

Hameda and the others led their camels away from the trough and hobbled them some distance off, where they could browse on the stunted bushes that grew in profusion round the well. Before long the whole place was seething with angry, roaring camels and excited, gesticulating men. On the outskirts of the crowd, three Q'ada erected a low tent over a young boy, obviously very ill. The Frenchman gave a sudden exclamation as an elderly distinguished-looking Tuareg squatted beside the sick boy.

"That's the Sheikh himself! That must be his youngest son. I wondered why he didn't come and greet us."

"The boy's pretty sick," said Bob gravely. "I can tell from here that he's got a rocketing temperature."

"I'm going over," said Deschamps.

The Sheikh extended a hand in greeting but he did not turn his head or let his eyes leave the boy.

"Greetings, O Sheikh, thy father's heart is bruised," said the Frenchman quietly. "What ails the boy?"

The Sheikh raised his lined face, and looked at Deschamps. His eyes, usually hard and fierce, were dimmed and softened with love and anxiety for his son.

“Alas,” said the old man, “a great boil on his back, that brings fierce, high fevers and eats up all his strength. He can neither rest during the day nor sleep at night with the pain. It is the will of Allah!”

“It is the will of Allah that no one should suffer!” retorted Deschamps angrily. “Thou knowest me, O Sheikh. Have I ever told thee wrong or caused thee to mistrust me? Let me see this great boil of which you speak.”

Gently, yet almost unwillingly, for his love for his son made him jealous of anyone else attending the sick boy, the old Sheikh helped him to turn on his side. Deschamps gave one horrified glance at the colossal carbuncle that the Sheikh had called ‘a boil.’

“What is the boy’s name?” he demanded.

“Achmet, my youngest and my dearest son,” replied the old man.

Deschamps bent over the rough couch on which the boy lay.

“Stay like that, Achmet,” he said quietly with a reassuring smile. “Take the weight off that sore place. I have a friend with me, a young

and very learned *haqqim* * who can make you well again."

"But if Allah wills that he should die . . ." began the Sheikh mournfully.

"Allah does *not* will him to die," Deschamps retorted impatiently, and called, "Hey, Bob! Job for you."

Bob came over, Vic following. The presence of another boy seemed to give Achmet confidence. They smiled at each other.

"Can you do it?" asked Deschamps as Bob examined the swollen infected place, as big as an egg.

Bob looked grave.

"They're nasty things to operate on, even with all the adjuncts of a modern hospital," he said in a low voice. "They're as poisonous as a cobra's bite. If I operate it's four to one against success."

"And if you don't," retorted Deschamps shortly, "what are his chances of survival?"

"Not one in a thousand."

Deschamps glanced from the boy to the Sheikh and back again.

"The old man's going to be the stumbling-block. They're so pig-headedly fatalistic. 'If Allah wills' and so forth. If he's made up his mind that Allah wants the boy to die, he'll just sit

* Medical man, a doctor.

here doing nothing until the boy does die. He won't raise his little finger to thwart his cock-eyed notion about the will of Allah."

"I can't operate if the boy's father's opposed to it," said Bob.

"Tripe!" exclaimed Vic. "Where d'you think you are, Bob? Some local hospital back home?"

"Hear, hear!" returned Deschamps. "Look here, Bob, if I can talk the old man round, have you got the instruments in the first-aid box to do it?"

Bob nodded.

"I can manage. I've enough dope for a local anæsthetic. It's swabs and dressings we'll want."

"Will soft white muslin do?"

"It'll have to. Provided it's sterilised and there's enough of it."

"Right!" said Deschamps decisively. "Leave the old man to me and start getting your things ready."

Two hours later Bob wiped the streaming sweat from his face and adjusted the end of the last bandage.

"We'd better take it in turns to sit up with him all night," he told the others. "If any of these people start messing about with these dressings they'll succeed in killing him for a certainty."

Two days later Bob pronounced Achmet out of

danger and the Sheikh was beside himself with joy. He insisted on giving a full ceremonial feast next day to mark his son's recovery. In the early evening ten of his men with the senior Elder of the tribe rode off after much whispering and secret discussion with the Sheikh.

Bob and Vic were squatting beside their fire when Deschamps and Hamedra joined them, looking excited.

"Look here," said Deschamps, "I've just learnt something. These people are on their way to Smara! That's where those men have set off for this evening. I've discovered that by accident. I can't understand why they've all been so hush-hush about it."

"Raiding the place, I expect," suggested Vic.

"I doubt it," answered Henri. "You don't go and buy provisions for a feast in a place you're going to raid a day or two later."

"Not a bad bluff, though," said Bob.

"It's advertising the fact that you're in the neighbourhood, and that's almost against the etiquette of battle among these people. But the point is this. They're going to Smara, and after that operation on Achmet, Bob will be *persona grata*. If we go with them, we may be able to do our impressive entry after all."

"I wish we'd been able to send Fuhazi along

with them," Vic remarked thoughtfully. "He might have been able to find out something about Ron. He'd find out more in ten minutes than we would in a day."

Deschamps piled some more fuel on the fire.

"On the other hand, the Q'ada are bound to talk about us as they're buying the sheep and the honey and the cheeses and so on for the feast in our honour. If the Smara people have a white man as a slave there, they're pretty certain to mention the fact."

"I can't help feeling there's something not quite open and above-board about all this," Bob put in with a slight frown. "If you think back, this caravan was coming *away* from Smara, not travelling towards it. They approached this well from the opposite direction from us."

"Strike me pink!" exclaimed Vic. "So they were! Bob, you're on to something there."

"Did you know," Hamedra asked, leaning forward and speaking in Arabic, "that some of their men are wounded? They know that the *Sidi* Bob is a great and clever surgeon. Why don't they show him their wounds, so that he may heal them?"

Deschamps gave a short laugh.

"Now I wonder—is that telepathy?"

All the same, he looked rather worried. Now

that he thought it over it was certainly odd that the Sheikh left them so much to their own devices. But all they could do was to wait.

The Q'ada who had ridden into Smara returned next afternoon, and both Deschamps and Vic noticed that the man in charge of the party looked remarkably pleased with himself. He jumped straight from his camel to the ground and told one of the tribesmen to hobble and feed it. Then he remained closeted with the Sheikh for over half an hour. Whatever news it was that the man brought from Smara it obviously took a load of worry from the Sheikh's shoulders. The lines of strain and anxiety vanished from his expression and he came out of his tent, with Achmet leaning rather weakly on his arm, to make much of his guests at the banquet.

As the preparations for the feast and the entertainment of the guests of honour progressed it became clear that the strain was becoming too much for the convalescent boy. Bob watched him with a keen professional eye.

"Look here," he said to Deschamps in a whisper, "can you drop a hint to the Sheikh that unless he chases Achmet back to bed at once the boy may have a very serious relapse? It is pretty certain his temperature has gone up several degrees in the last hour. I'm worried about him."

"I know," replied Henri. "But I'm not sure that I can do anything about it without starting an argument. I gather from something Fuhazi appears to have overheard that the boy protested pretty strongly about coming at all. Papa evidently put his foot down."

"You can tell the old fool from me," said Bob grimly, "that if I don't get that boy back into bed with 'M. and B.' and some aspirin, to-night's feast may develop into to-morrow's funeral!"

"I'll have to do it pretty tactfully," Deschamps began.

"Too late!" snapped Bob, and leaped to his feet. Achmet had slumped forward, semi-conscious and muttering incoherently. Bob picked him up in his arms and carried him into his father's tent.

"My son! My son!" wailed the old Sheikh. "It is the will of Allah and we cannot prevent it."

"I saved him before," retorted Bob bluntly. "Provided you do exactly what I say, I may be able to do it again." He took the boy's temperature, felt his pulse and looked at his eyes by rolling back the lids. Then he glanced at Deschamps and Vic. "Let's hope it's nothing more complicated than a sudden and violent dose of malaria. His temperature's a hundred and four and his pulse a hundred and twenty. In his state of

weakness that's bad enough. . . ." He paused, frowning.

"But he's not shivering," said Deschamps, completing Bob's sentence. "I know too much about malaria not to spot that."

"Exactly," replied Bob. "He's got most of the symptoms of what's commonly but incorrectly termed 'brain-fever.'"

"What does he say?" asked the Sheikh.

Bob guessed the meaning of the old man's question.

"Tell him that Achmet is dangerously, but not necessarily fatally, ill. It has nothing to do with the carbuncle and I think I can save him. The boy's not dying yet, but he may die unless the Sheikh carries out my orders."

Deschamps translated and the old Sheikh bowed in agreement.

Bob went on in a low voice. "Let the feast continue. Achmet is still capable of understanding what is going on and if it was abandoned it might worry him. Worry or noise would be fatal. Tell the Sheikh to give orders that the whole camp is to move fifty yards away from this tent and that in it there must be absolute silence. Only the Sheikh, or one of us, may come in. I'm going to give him a shot of dope that will bring his temperature down and send him to sleep.

Tell the old man to keep the festivities as quiet as possible and to keep everybody away. Even we had better keep out for the next three or four hours. Fuhazi has the makings of a good nurse. He'd better sit in here and call me if there's any great alteration."

The decisive note and calm confidence in Bob's voice restored the Sheikh's faith in his ability to cure his son. He nodded dumbly and went out.

A quarter of an hour later Bob joined him at the camp-fire.

"The fever is going down," he told them reassuringly. "If he improves until dawn, all should be well."

"Allah be thanked," muttered the old man.

The feast was nearly over when Bob went quietly across to the now isolated tent. Fuhazi met him in the doorway.

"Call the Sidi Henri, master," whispered the man. The name 'Deschamps' was beyond him.

Deschamps came and they spoke in low urgent whispers for some minutes. The Frenchman's face became stern and he looked extremely worried.

His expression startled Bob.

"What's up, Henri?"

"How much reliance can you place on what that boy mutters in his present state? I

mean, is it likely to be fact or the fantasies of delirium?"

"If it's malaria—fantasy. If it's 'brain-fever,' more likely than not a basis of fact somewhere. Why?"

"This," retorted Deschamps grimly. "Putting bits and pieces of the boy's talk together, Fuhazi, who can speak some Q'ada, says that they evidently attacked Smara a few days ago and were driven off. The Sheikh's brother and four senior members of the tribe were captured and are being held for a colossal ransom in sheep, salt, and silver. He rates your abilities as a doctor so highly that he's arranged through the people who went to Smara yesterday to trade *you* for his brother. There's smallpox among the slaves. . . . I'd like to put a bullet in the old scoundrel!"

Bob seemed thunderstruck.

"The old swine!" he muttered angrily.

"I remember saying at Fachi," Deschamps went on, "that the Q'ada had a queer streak of treachery. They'll always sell out to the highest bidder."

"But, my masters," whispered Fuhazi urgently, "we can't bother about this boy. We must escape—fly at once."

Bob shook his head.

"Sorry, Fuhazi, it can't be done. This boy is my patient and I must stay with him whatever happens to me." He turned to Deschamps and went on in English. "Explain to him that it involves the honour of the medical tribe to which I belong; that if I were to leave Achmet now, I would bring disgrace on my fellow doctors. Sorry to talk like a Sunday-school lesson, but you know what I mean."

And Fuhazi understood.

As Bob walked away, the Chleuch's eyes followed him and he echoed, unwittingly, the greatest epitaph ever written: "There goes a very gallant gentleman."

Bob resumed his place of honour beside the Sheikh as though nothing had happened, and Deschamps repeated Fuhazi's words to himself.

"Yes," he muttered, "even so would Ronnie—Ronnie, Bob, Vic—they're all chips of the same block, Englishmen!"

Neither by hint nor clue did Bob or Deschamps let the Sheikh know what they had learned, nor did Bob breathe a word of it to Vic.

Vic took the first turn to sit with Achmet and as soon as he was out of earshot, Bob called a conference round the camp-fire.

He repeated bluntly what he had said to Fuhazi. He considered that his first duty as a doctor

lay with Achmet. He suggested that the others should take Vic and make a bolt back to Marrakech and put the facts before the French authorities.

"Nothing doing," said Deschamps flatly, and both Fuhazi and Hamedra growled assent. "Use your common sense, Bob. It's bad enough to know that Ronnie's there, but if Vic thought that you were, too, the kid would go right out of his mind. It would be a brutal thing to do to him, besides being very unfair to me. Besides, what about the operation on Sim's tongue? You can't let him down."

"I know, I know," protested Bob. "It's a choice of evils, and blood is thicker than water."

"In this case," retorted the Frenchman, "Vic is more important than Ronnie."

"Vic's got you to lean on," replied Bob. "Ronnie hasn't. Hang it all, Henri, look at it from my point of view. If I'm to be traded to Smara as a cross between a slave and a doctor to cope with smallpox among the slaves, it's a safe bet that I'll be well treated and given absolutely wholesale privileges. From what you've told us in the past it's pretty clear that the wealth of Smara lies in the slaves. These people aren't going to chuck this wealth away by impeding me if they think I can save it for them."

"So what?" interrupted Deschamps ungraciously.

"This," Bob went on. "To all intents and purposes I'm not likely to be regarded as a captive at all, less still as a slave. Going about alone among them as a doctor I stand a better chance of picking up Ronnie's trail than we ever would any other way."

"You've no right to risk your life or sacrifice yourself like this," Deschamps grumbled.

Bob laughed.

"You should talk about other people risking their lives!" he retorted. "Sacrifice my foot! We've come all the way to Smara for one thing, and one thing only—to rescue Ronnie. And yet, when we're handed an absolutely heaven-sent opportunity on a plate to discover Ronnie's whereabouts with the minimum of delay, you start kicking up a fuss!"

"There's a lot more to it than that," Deschamps expostulated. "Although if it wasn't for Vic I'm not saying that I wouldn't agree with you. In your place, I'd probably jump at doing the same thing. But Vic's presence makes all the difference."

"On the contrary," said Bob firmly. "I know Vic better than you do. Heaven knows I'm fond enough of Ron to risk anything for him, but Vic

worships him to the point of adoration. Ronnie's been a father as well as a brother to Vic. From the minute we heard that Ronnie was a captive Vic has suffered the tortures of the damned. If I can take a short cut to finding Ronnie's whereabouts, I'm going to for Vic's sake. But in any case I've got to stay with my patient—little Achmet—to the very last."

"You're under an equal obligation to Sim," Deschamps pointed out again, clutching at a last feeble straw.

Bob shook his head.

"That's just it. I'm not—yet. Achmet's a present-tense patient and Sim is still future indicative. I can do nothing for him until we get back to civilisation, with a properly equipped hospital and special instruments. No, Henri, this is a heaven-sent chance to find Ronnie in the shortest possible time."

And nothing any of them could say could make him see the matter in any other light.

Four days later, Achmet smiled wanly and squeezed Bob's fingers affectionately.

On the evening of the seventh day they camped a mile or so outside the low red walls of Smara. Was Ronnie somewhere within? They would know on the morrow. Vic was nearly ill with nervous excitement.

Bob was calm, rugged, and inflexible in his decision, of which his younger brother knew nothing.

Darkness fell. Suddenly and without warning, a hail of slugs whistled through the camp, and the Q'ada, for once off their guard, were caught napping and unprepared. A dozen of them, singing round their camp-fire a moment before, sprawled in grotesque attitudes in the sand.

With an eerie, blood-curdling yell and the moonlight gleaming dully on sword and dagger, the dreaded Blue Moors swept like a hurricane into the camp.

CHAPTER XIV

“WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOUR?”

FOR a few seconds the Q'ada, caught by surprise, wavered. The Blue Moors, although outnumbered by two to one, had obtained a great advantage through the unexpectedness of their attack and made good use of it, slashing, hacking, and stabbing at all within reach.

Deschamps jerked his Luger from his belt, but the uncertain flickering light of the camp-fires made it impossible to distinguish Q'ada from Blue Moor, friend (of a sort) from foe (for a certainty). His quick mind, trained and accustomed by the roles he had played during the war to weigh up and appreciate situations produced by sudden events, realised that their white clothes made them an easy and outstanding target. For an instant he glimpsed the face of their treacherous enemy Abdullah as he sped past a camp-fire. Deschamps' pistol barked and with a feeling of genuine satisfaction he saw the Fachi nobleman pitch forward, drum his heels on the ground for a moment, and then lie still for ever.

By now, the Q'ada had recovered from their

initial surprise and, throwing away their sword scabbards, they flung themselves into the battle. The dull, heavy *clack!* of their broad-bladed Crusader-like swords shearing through cloth and flesh, and smashing through bone to the victim's vitals, made a satanic background to their shrill battle-cries. Numbers were now even and it was clear that neither side would ask, expect, or give quarter. It would be a fight to the last man on either side.

Deschamps seized Bob and Fuhazi by the arms and spoke imperatively in Arabic.

"Grab Vic and try to reach the broken ground about a mile this side of the city wall. Heaven knows where Hamed and Sim are, but I'll find them and join you. Run! Go to the left and keep hidden." He vanished into the darkness and the battle to find his two servants.

"Go on, Vic," said Bob. "Beat it with Fuhazi. I'll have to get that kid Achmet or they'll butcher him."

With his brother Ronald's automatic gripped tightly in his hand he ran for the Sheikh's tent.

Fuhazi, more used to the alarms and excursions of tribal warfare than Vic, was completely unperturbed by the battle and carnage around them. A Chleuch by birth and a fighting man since he

had been strong enough, at the age of eleven, to hold a rifle steady, he was experienced in the art of stealthy night-raiding and fierce, cold-blooded, hand-to-hand battle against isolated detachments of the French Foreign Legion. A queer sixth sense of impending danger caused him to duck and hurl Vic to one side, and a wickedly curved knife that would otherwise have ripped Vic from throat to waist shattered itself on the barrel of Fuhazi's rifle.

Even in the pitch darkness Fuhazi's timing was faultless. His long slim hand fastened round his unseen opponent's wrist like a steel clamp; there was the quick snap of splintering bone and the beginning of a scream of agony, cut suddenly short as Fuhazi's knee jerked up, catching the map below the ear with the force of a sledgehammer, breaking his neck as swiftly and as certainly as a hangman's knot. Another figure leapt at them out of the darkness and by the momentary flare-up of a burning tent Vic recognised the distorted features of Ali, the cloth merchant, his dagger drawn back to bury itself in Fuhazi's throat. Vic whirled the butt of his rifle in the air and brought it smashing down across the man's face, splitting it wide open.

“ Good! Good, my master! Well done!”

exclaimed the Chleuch, and seizing Vic in his arms, he slung him across his shoulder and sped like an antelope into the darkness.

Bob found the Sheikh's tent deserted except for the body of a Q'ada tribesman, his sword still gripped in his hand, which lay across Achmet's empty couch. The rugs and skins which had covered the sick boy were wet with blood, but whether his or the dead man's Bob had no means of telling. But the Q'ada had evidently died in defending his young lord, and Bob ground his teeth in fury. Achmet, weak, ill, and alone in the hands of these incarnate fiends . . . Bob vowed to kill at least one Blue Moor to avenge the boy. As he left the tent to run back to where he had left Vic and Fuhazi, he heard the noise of a fierce, remorseless hand-to-hand fight close beside him. The Moors were setting light to the Q'ada tents and by the reflection Bob saw the old Sheikh, one arm supporting his son, holding three of the Blue Moors at bay with his sword. The light of the burning tents showed that the old man's face was glistening with sweat—his veil had been torn away in the fight—and he was hard pressed and tiring rapidly. Bob raised his pistol and rid the treacherous old Sheikh of his opponents. Seizing the old man by the arm and helping him to half-carry the boy, he hustled them

“ Will you Walk into My Parlour ? ” 233

through the darkness towards the strange City of Shadows.

“ No, no ! ” shouted the old Sheikh to make himself heard above the din. “ Out into the desert ! Out into the desert ! ” With the strength of frenzy he suddenly tore Achmet from Bob’s grasp and rushed with him into the darkness.

“ You infernal old idiot ! ” Bob stormed after him, but it was useless to follow. With a heavy heart Bob set out to find Vic and Fuhazi. He had not gone twenty yards before a terrific orange flash lit up the heavens and from the City of Smara came the crash of an explosion, followed by the rumble of falling masonry. The ground beneath his feet vibrated with the force of it, but the flash that had lit up the sky showed him the place where Vic and Fuhazi crouched in the shadow of some rocks. Simultaneously it enabled Deschamps, bleeding from a flesh wound in the arm and with his pistol empty, to catch sight of Bob, and to follow. Of Hamed and Sim he had found no trace.

For an hour they lay in the security of their hiding-place while the noise of the battle lessened and finally ceased.

“ Who won, do you ‘ hink ? ” Vic asked shakily at length.

“ Neither, ” replied Deschamps grimly. “ A

draw. Both sides wiped right out, from what I know of them."

"How nice for us!" said Bob bitterly. "We set out to reach Smara. We're betrayed by our men, captured by the Blue Moors, rescued by our own faithful servant, shot up by the Mohurren, Hamed and I get captured while you and Vic nearly die of thirst and are found in the nick of time by some wandering Bambara. Hamed and I, plus Sim, escape from the Mohurren and are on the point of being re-captured when you turn up with the Bambara, who double-cross the whole lot of us. We all get away, fall in with the Q'ada we met in Fachi, and I twice prevent the Sheikh's son from dying. Just to show his gratitude the boy's father decides to trade me as a slave in exchange for his brother. The Q'ada get wiped out by the Blue Moors from Fachi. We've lost what's left of our kit and our camels are heaven knows where. Hamed and Sim, as likely as not, have been hacked to death in the fighting between the Q'ada and the Blue Moors. Well, we've done what we set out to do. We've arrived at Smara and so far as I can see we're darn' well going to stay here because we can't get away again! It's all simply lovely, isn't it?"

"What do you reckon that explosion was?" asked Vic.

Deschamps made no comment on Bob's bitter speech and offered no answer to Vic's question. After a moment or two he looked up suddenly.

“Fuhazi, where did Hamed and Sim go just before the Blue Moors attacked?”

“To the camels, master, to see whether all was well for the night.”

“Where were our camels tied?”

“To the south, master. There were thorn bushes and some grass.”

“To the south?” Deschamps repeated thoughtfully. “The Blue Moors attacked from the north. . . . Still, it's strange.”

“What is?” asked Vic.

“That so far as we know neither of them came back to see what had happened to us. That's not like Hamed—nor Sim either, I should say.”

“And there's something else,” added Bob. “I gather that Smara's got a fair-sized and somewhat warlike population. Has it occurred to you that although there was a ding-dong battle going on a stone's throw from their front door, nobody rode out to see what was going on or to swipe any loot that might have been lying about?”

“I'm still wondering what the explosion was,” Vic said again. “It sounded just like an H.E. bomb.”

Bob gave an impatient exclamation.

"I wish it was light. We can't do anything in this confounded darkness. Hameda may be wounded and Sim can't shout to attract attention. . . . Achmet, too. Don't you 'think we ought to try a search?"

' Deschamps put the question to Fuhazi.

"No," said the Chleuch. "We could do no good. Daylight will not be long. Wait. It would be better to sleep, if we can."

Dawn came at last. Cautiously they moved their position until they could see what had happened. It was a shocking sight of desolation and death. The tents had been burned out; food and stores destroyed. Bodies of both Q'ada and the Blue Moors lay as they had fallen, except where jackals had already begun their sickening work. As Deschamps had said, each side had fought to the bitter end.

There was no sign of either Hameda and Sim or of the Sheikh and Achmet. Away in the distance the camels browsed unconcernedly on the scattered thorn bushes.

"Well, Vic, what do you make of it all?" asked Bob.

Vic pointed.

"We've had the camels, anyway. Look, there are four men rounding them up and driving them towards Smara."

“ Will you Walk into My Parlour ? ” 237

“ That’s that,” said Deschamps. “ Well, as Bob said, we’ve arrived here at last, and here, it seems, we stay! So much for our impressive entry.”

Bob laughed ruefully.

“ ‘ The best-laid schemes of mice and men,’ ” he quoted. “ We are alive, anyway. That’s something to be thankful for. Better to find Ronnie on foot than not at all.”

Deschamps glanced around.

“ Fuhazi seems to have salvaged something.” He raised his voice. “ What have you got there, Fuhazi?”

“ Tea, my masters, some sugar and a little flour.”

Bob looked at the others.

“ I could do with a can of tea if we can find something to boil it in, but for heaven’s sake let’s move back to where we spent the night. These corpses don’t give one an appetite for breakfast.”

They went back to the hollow in the broken ground, while Fuhazi boiled water for the tea and made bread. At length Deschamps stood up.

“ Here goes,” he announced. “ There’s Smara—one of the most mysterious and cruellest places in the world. By the left—quick march! ‘ “ Will you walk into my parlour?” said the spider to the fly.’ ”

There was a strange air of triumph about Fuhazi

as they trudged across the desert towards Smara. Usually silent, he burst suddenly into song.

"I'm glad he's so happy about everything," Bob commented ironically. "He must be a Scout—whistling and smiling under all difficulties."

"It's queer," replied his brother. "You know, when you and Hamedra were taken off by the Mohurren he was almost green with worry and anxiety. Yet now, when he can't be sure whether Hamedra is safe, dead, dying or wounded, or even where he is at all, he's as happy as a lark. Doesn't even look as though he cared."

Deschamps was listening to the song with a puzzled frown.

"I've never heard him sing before. It's not exactly exuberance of spirits on his part, either. That's one of the Koranic psalms—a sort of pæan of praise and thanksgiving for something that's happened after a long period of waiting. Like the Jews' 'When Israel came out of Egypt.'"

Fuhazi unobtrusively took the lead and kept them moving across dead ground until they breasted a slight rise and found themselves unexpectedly close to the walls of the city. For a moment he stood motionless, gazing at it with fierce smouldering eyes.

Deschamps gave a low whistle.

"Phew-w! My holy aunt! Look at that.

Talk about a blitz! Half the walls are down and there's hardly a roof left in the place.”

“I said it sounded like an H.E. bomb,” Vic reminded them.

“I believe you're right, too,” said Bob. • “It was either that or a ton of dynamite.”

“What do you make of it, Fuhazi?” asked Deschamps.

Fuhazi shook his head but kept silent. Shading his eyes, he scrutinised the sand dunes to the east of where they stood. Then he pointed.

“Behold, the camels!”

“How nice!” retorted Bob. “So what? If Fuhazi doesn't mind my mentioning it, I'd rather like to get into the city. I have a brother named Ronald——” The attempt at light-hearted irony suddenly faltered and then vanished. “And there's that explosion last night,” he finished up.

“Come, Fuhazi! Let us go on to the city gate,” said Deschamps.

“Wait, my master,” answered the Chleuch without turning his head. “There is no city. Smara has gone in dust and fire. Hameda, my brother, has blotted it out as he vowed he would.”

“What, in heaven's name, are you talking about?” demanded Deschamps angrily.

But Fuhazi did not answer. He stood, like a man in ecstasy, staring towards the East.

Vic nudged his brother with his elbow, and whispered:

"I say, Bob, what's going on? Can you follow all this? Is Fuhazi going barmy, or what?"

"Search me, Vic, I don't know. I'm out of my depth. It's up to Henri now."

If Deschamps heard, he took no notice. He followed the direction of Fuhazi's unfaltering gaze and his face went suddenly blank. His eyes, like pin-points, were focused on the score of camels coming steadily towards them, and in particular on the man who suddenly broke from their flank and galloped ahead. As the rider leapt from his saddle to the ground, Fuhazi dropped on his knee holding out his hands for the other to grasp.

"Hameda, my brother, I am thy man, thy subject and thy servant. My kaid and my brother, thou art my lord and I thy bondsman." A fierce, delighted smile overspread his face. "Now is our father avenged, and they who captured him and made him a slave are blotted from the earth. The oath we swore hand-in-hand as children is fulfilled. Smara, the City of Shadows, is itself a shadow."

Hameda released his brother's hands and turned to salute Deschamps, Victor, and Bob. He smiled a quiet, dignified smile.

"Did I not say, before Atua betrayed you, that

“Will you Walk into My Parlour?” 241

I would come to Smara with you, that I had work to do and that maybe I would get there first? It was my father that I had vowed to avenge, and now I have kept my oath.”

Hameda's expression became as inscrutable as the Sphinx.

“Tell me,” demanded Deschamps. “Remember he is their brother even as Fuhazi is yours. Is he safe?” Deschamps' voice faltered as he asked the question.

A mischievous smile twitched the corners of Hameda's mouth.

“He is safe,” he replied, in a tone so low that neither Vic nor Bob could hear him. “He comes now, but he knows not that we came to rescue him or that his brothers are here. He knows only that I opened the door of the slave market—I and Sim—and took him apart before telling the others to run for their lives. . . . For it was there I went, my master, while the battle was at its height and none saw me. . . . He and I together slew the guards of the Emir's powder store and it was he who blew it up . . . but I told him nothing. For who am I but my master's servant, now and for ever?”

Deschamps turned back to Bob and Vic. His face was still expressionless.

“Hameda has settled a private score in Smara.

He blew up the powder magazine and practically wiped out the entire population."

Vic went as white as a sheet.

"But Ronnie—what about Ronlie?" he gasped.

Deschamps shook his head.

"Ron wasn't there when the place went up. There's a Tuareg slave coming along with the camels who may be able to help. . . . Hamed and Sim turned the prisoners loose from the slave market before they touched off the gunpowder. Don't worry too much."

Bob said nothing. His disappointment was too bitter for him to speak. Suddenly he stiffened, staring at the man in the blue robes of a Tuareg at the flank of the camels, now fifty yards away.

"Ronnie!" His voice rang across the desert with the clarity of a bell, clearly audible above the noise of the camels.

For an instant the Tuareg on the flank paused and then they could see his heels drum on the neck of his camel, urging it forward in a whirlwind gallop.

"Bob! Vic! Henri!"

His blue robe billowed out behind him as he leaped from the saddle.

Henri Deschamps checked an impulsive movement to embrace his friend. He had caught

“ Will you Walk into My Parlour ? ” 243

sight of the expression on Vic's face and he turned abruptly away to help Sim and Fuhazi with the camels. . . . Ronnie might be his greatest friend, but Bob and Vic were his brothers.

CHAPTER XV

"REUNION"

FROM the balcony on the first floor of a luxurious hotel in Marrakech, Henri Deschamps stared at the distant snow-capped Atlas.

"It's no good, Henri," said Ronnie Ellis, who stood beside him. "Worrying won't make any difference. There's nothing we can do except hope, and wait until Bob gets back."

"I know," Deschamps replied. "But that doesn't make things easier and this suspense is awful."

Ronnie Ellis smiled.

"Chuck it, Henri. Bob's a brilliant surgeon. If anyone can do it, he can."

Henri Deschamps shrugged his shoulders in one of his rare typical Gallic gestures.

"I know, I know, but I can't help being anxious. The Mohurren treasure haunts me far more now than the Senegalese emeralds you and I were after. Until or unless we can find that helpless old Professor and restore him to sanity, Sim is our one and only hope. And even he may know nothing. We can't ever find that

out unless Bob can restore his power of speech.”

Vic hailed them from the door of a room at the far end of the balcony.

“ Hey, you two! Come here!”

They found him standing beside a table littered with maps, documents, and other papers, staring at a telegram he held in his hand.

“ What’s up, Vic?” Ronnie demanded.

Vic handed the message to his brother.

“ Here’s a reply to your letter to Oxford. He’s probably Professor Hubert Haskoll of Trinity College, who came out here thirty-three years ago and has never been heard of since.”

“ I suppose it’s something to know that,” said Deschamps.

“ It’d be a good deal more if we actually had the old boy here,” grumbled Ronnie. “ He’s a better bet for the Treasure Stakes than Sim.”

“ He’ll turn up all right,” Deschamps insisted. “ I’ll stake my oath that the other slaves Bob got turned loose won’t let him out of their sight until they hand him over to some Europeans. They’ll regard him as sacred: a *marabout*, touched—in more ways than one—by the hand of Allah, and a God-given mascot to lead them to safety.”

None of them heard the quiet opening of the door.

"Are you referring to Professor Haskoll?" inquired Bob.

The others turned round, suddenly startled.

"Hang it, Bob! The telegram hasn't been here five minutes," exclaimed Vic. "How on earth do you know whether he's Professor Haskoll or not?"

Bob came into the room and sat down, bringing a faint aroma of iodoform and anæsthetic with him. He lit a cigarette and smiled tantalisingly.

"He's just told me so," he said at length, blowing a cloud of smoke in the air.

"*He's* just told you so!" exclaimed the others in chorus. "What do you mean?" And then:

"What about Sim?" demanded Deschamps.

"Can he speak?" asked Vic simultaneously.

"Come off it, Bob," said Ronnie Ellis. "Spill the beans."

Bob laughed, and poured out some coffee that a white-robed servant had just brought in.

"Did somebody ask if Sim could speak?" he enquired. "You'd be surprised! When I left him twenty minutes ago he was sitting on the edge of his bed jabbering away nineteen to the dozen. None of the doctors or anyone else could get a word in edgeways—not even while he was kissing my knees and addressing us as everything known to exist in heaven and earth. As a vocabulary

of gratitude and flowery compliment what he said ought to be put down on record and put in some Museum of Etymology. Nothing like it has been known in the history of mankind since the *Benedicite* appeared in the vulgar tongue in the *Book of Common Prayer*. No, I'm not being irreverent. That's just what it sounded like."

"Don't push it too far!" snapped Ronnie impatiently. "Sim's operation is no joking matter, either to him or to us. Do you really think he'll be able to speak properly?"

Bob nodded.

"Yes, there's a slight slurring, rather like a stammer, over some of his sounds, but he'll get over that. He can speak all right. As I say, half an hour ago he was jabbering away like a vacuum-cleaner salesman."

"How on earth could he?" demanded Vic. "If you didn't operate until after lunch he'd still be unconscious."

Bob finished his coffee and then shook his head seriously.

"Sorry, chaps, but I'm afraid I've deceived you. An E.N.T.* specialist from Casablanca and I operated ten days ago, the day after we got here. I didn't tell you before as you all had enough to worry over without that. We took the tubes out

* Ear, Nose, and Throat.

of his throat and the dressings out of his mouth this afternoon. I don't want to brag, but *I* did the operation while the specialist stood by in case I went wrong. Even if I say so myself it was a unique job of work. It's never been done before as far as I know. I'm hoping that if I do a thesis on it and on the trepanning of old Haskoll the University may give me my M.S. without my having to go back to Guy's for another six months."

"Good show, Bob!" said Deschamps quietly. "But I don't quite get what you mean about the old Professor."

"He was picked up the day before yesterday by a company of the Foreign Legion on manoeuvres in the desert south of Bou Denib. They sent him up here by ambulance plane. He was in a pretty bad way and the senior surgeon in residence at the hospital called me in when I went to see Sim. We wheeled him into the X-ray department and my original guess of compression was correct."

"Do you mean he's here, in Marrakech, and that he's all right?" demanded Vic excitedly.

Bob shook his head slowly.

"He's here in Marrakech, but I'm afraid he's not all right," he replied seriously. "In fact, he's very, very ill. There's no possible chance of questioning him for at least another week. I'm

going along to have another look at him this evening. In view of the fact that I found him in the slave-pit, the hospital people more or less signed him as my patient.”

“ For heaven’s sake,” said Ronnie, “ tell us the whole story before I heave something at you.”•

“ All right, give me a chance. I imagine that when the Mohurren captured him they must have given him a crack over the head. Anyway, the X-ray showed that the cranium was dented, so to speak, and one tiny patch was pressing on the part of the brain that controls the memory. It entails a nasty operation to put it right, but it’s quite a common one. It’s done nearly every day in the big London hospitals. I knew *how* to do it although I’d never actually done one before. The snag lay in his physical condition. Heaven alone knows what privations he’s suffered, particularly during the journey from the slave-pit—his heart was very tired and badly strained. An immediate operation was essential but it didn’t look as though his heart would allow him to survive the ordeal. All the same, we decided to risk it and gave him a local anæsthetic. A general anæsthetic like ether or chloroform would have killed him at once. Just as we were ready the resident surgeon funked it and I had to take over on my own responsibility. Thank heaven, it

worked! In addition to the local we'd had to give him a shot of morphia, just enough to make him drowsy, and that wore off soon after we'd got him back in the ward. He obviously knew he was in a hospital because he asked if he'd had an accident, what day of the week it was, and where was he? I told him it was Thursday and that he was in Marrakech.

" 'Thursday!' he said. 'Then I've been here four days. It was Monday when those dreadful Tuaregs rode up. How did you get me back here so quickly?'

"Then he told me I'd find some money in his despatch case and would I please cable to his family and to Trinity College, Oxford. He gave me his name as Hubert Haskoll, and I gather he held some chair in classical archæology."

Bob stopped speaking and lit another cigarette.

"How do our plans stand now, Henri?" he demanded.

"Rather a case of 'as we were,'" replied Deschamps. "Sim may well be a godsend now that he can speak. Do you really think that the Professor's mind is a blank regarding the time he was a prisoner of the Mohurren? If so, it's a nasty blow to our hopes of getting a clue to the whereabouts of the treasure chamber."

"I'm afraid so," said Bob. "The poor old

chap seems to think it's still 1913. He's lost thirty odd years.”

“ Not too helpful,” commented Ronnie. “ What do you think we'd better do about it?”

“ What can we do?” retorted Bob with a shrug. “ If there's a gap, there's a gap.”

Deschamps began to pace restlessly up and down the room.

“ I'm as determined to find the Mohurren treasure as Quatermain and Sir Henry Curtis were to find King Solomon's Mines,” he said. “ How soon can we have a chat to Onesimus?”

“ To-morrow,” replied Bob. “ Give him a chance to calm down. At the moment he's so excited that he couldn't talk sense if he tried.”

Next morning Bob was early at the hospital. The old Professor was stronger and sleeping peacefully. Bob left him alone and took Sim—who now gave his name as Abdel Saud—back to the hotel. They found Fuhazi and Hamed, resplendent in the scarlet silk *burnous* of a kaid, sitting on the balcony with Deschamps, Ronnie Ellis, and Vic drinking coffee.

Greetings and congratulations over, they demanded news of Professor Haskoll.

“ His heart's stronger,” said Bob briefly. “ If he's kept quiet, he may sleep himself well again.”

"What about the gap in his memory?" Deschamps asked.

"Too early to say yet. I know it's tantalising, but there it is."

Out of politeness, Deschamps translated for the benefit of Hamed, Fuhazi, and Sim—for 'Sim' he had always been to them and by his own request 'Sim' he was to remain.

"Is the knowledge and the memory of that thirty-three years gone for ever from the old chap's mind, or is it only temporarily lost in the subconscious, if that's what you call it?" Vic demanded suddenly.

His brother shook his head.

"'Fraid not, Vic. If it's gone, it's gone for ever. You see, the compression of the brain made him live, so to speak, in another mental dimension from us, and any recollection would be much deeper down than what we normally call the subconscious."

"A pity," said Vic slowly. "I thought perhaps I'd had an idea."

"What?" asked Ronnie, and Deschamps again translated for the benefit of Hamed and his brother.

"You know all those silver and gold things—goblets and statues and cups and what-not—in the Pasha's palace here? The stuff they showed

us when we went there last week. I was wondering, if we showed it to the old man, whether it might strike a sort of chord in his memory and we could lead the conversation round to the Mohurren. If he'd ever seen the Mohurren treasure he might give the game away by comparing it with the Pasha's."

"It's worth trying, anyway, when he's better," agreed Bob.

"Tell me," Deschamps asked Sim. "How long were you a prisoner in Mukazzim's stronghold?"

"Three months," replied Sim. "I was two months in the slave-pit in the cage next to the Touched of God whom ye have brought back from the world of shadows."

Hameda, always quick on the uptake, dived in with the next question.

"What think you of this story of treasure in the walls?"

"It is true," said Sim emphatically.

"How do you know?" Deschamps demanded quickly. "Have you seen it?"

"No," retorted Sim, jerking his chin in the air. "But the aged Touched of God has seen it. Yea, and I believe that he alone of all living men knows the secret of its hiding-place."

If Sim had intended to startle Deschamps and the three Ellis brothers, he certainly succeeded.

"Jehoshaphat!" exclaimed Vic.

"Go on," said Deschamps. "Why do you believe that?"

Sim appeared astonished at the sensation and excitement he had caused.

"When I was first brought there as a captive," he continued, "I was set to work in the slave-pit. At that time the learned one was ill, very ill of a fever, and in his delirium he spoke of the treasure and described it as a teacher would to his students. He explained how the great stone doorway opened and spoke of the inscriptions cut in the walls of the passages that led to the treasure vault. He spoke, too, of silver plates and golden cups that had belonged to kings, and of daggers encrusted with jewels that were enough to blind a fox when they flashed in the sunlight. I listened to him entranced, for his voice and his ways were those of a great teacher."

"What language did he speak in his dreams when the fever was upon him?" Bob shot at him suddenly.

"Often he spoke in your tongue, for I recognise its sounds," replied Sim unhesitatingly. "But frequently, too, he spoke in Arabic. Not as we do but as it is written in the Koran and in the Great Writings. It was only then that I could understand what he said."

“ Classical Arabic,” Deschamps murmured to the others, and then turned back to Sim. “ This ‘ great stone doorway ’ of which he spoke, did you identify it among the rocks ? ”

Onesimus shook his head regretfully.

“ Alas, my master, no ! Even had I done so I fear the great Golden Scorpion that guards the treasure chamber and whose sting is death—I fear him too much to have attempted to open the door.”

“ Golden Scorpion whose sting is death ! ” exclaimed Bob. “ What on earth is the man talking about ? ”

“ Don’t laugh at him ! ” said Deschamps. “ It’s real enough to him, anyway.”

“ It’s maddening, simply maddening ! ” muttered Ronnie Ellis to Vic as he strode impatiently about the room. “ To think that the secret reposes in the misty shadows of an old man’s mind and that a brilliant surgical operation which cures his madness blots it out for ever.”

“ Shut up ! ” snapped Bob. “ Psychopathy isn’t my forte, but keep quiet while I think. . . . Tell me, Sim, did the old man speak much of this Golden Scorpion ? ”

“ Only twice,” Sim replied, “ and then he spoke with a great terror. Whether he said more in his own tongue I cannot tell.”

Bob nodded.

"All right. That'll do to work on, anyway. I'll go along to the hospital again and see how he's getting on."

It was more than an hour before he returned.

"Any luck?" asked Deschamps. "Did the words 'Golden Scorpion' mean anything to him?"

"No," said Bob. "Nothing whatever. The last thirty-three years are a complete blank. He remembers nothing—knows nothing—of where he was, what he learned, or what happened to him. And I'm afraid he never will."

Deschamps stood up decisively.

"Be blowed to those Senegalese emeralds, Ron! 'Let marble crumble, this is living stone.'"

"What do you mean?" asked Ron.

The Frenchman smiled slowly.

"I'm afraid there's only one thing to be done now. We've got to see that the Professor gets safely back to Oxford. After that, of course, we can please ourselves. Personally, I feel that it is quite time that somebody dealt with the sting in the Golden Scorpion's tail. *N'est-ce pas, mes amis?*"

